

The background of the entire image is a light green color, decorated with a repeating pattern of teal-colored fern fronds. The fronds are stylized and appear to be of various species, some with more complex, feathery structures and others with simpler, linear shapes. They are scattered across the page, with some appearing in the top and bottom margins and others framing the central text area.

ANATOLY IVANOV

THE
ETERNAL
CALL

PROGRESS PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

Anatoly Ivanov (b. 1928), State Prize Winner and editor-in-chief of *Molodaya Guardia* magazine, has been writing for over twenty years. *Alka's Songs*, his first collection of short stories, was published in Novosibirsk in 1956. There followed his three novels: *Morning Glory* (1958), *Shadows Disappear at Noon* (1964) and *The Eternal Call* (1969), which have won acclaim both in the Soviet Union and abroad.

Anatoly Ivanov writes of Siberia, its past and present. Most of his books have been filmed and serialized.

The action of *The Eternal Call* covers nearly fifty years, from the turn of the century to the Great Patriotic War against fascism. The book's characters are peasants, workers, revolutionaries, Party functionaries and Red Army men and officers. As one of the main characters says: "Sooner or later the man'll begin thinking about the meaning of life.... And what forces him to do this is a powerful, compelling eternal call to life, an eternal desire to find his own place in life...." These words provide the key to all of Anatoly Ivanov's work.



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ANATOLY IVANOV

The Eternal Call



MOSCOW PROGRESS

1979

*Translated from the Russian
by Fainna Glagoleva
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А. Иванов

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A POWERFUL CALL TO LIFE

(Anatoly Ivanov and his work)

Anatoly Ivanov is one of the most original and interesting contemporary Soviet writers. He has devoted his work to portraying life in Siberia. The events he describes were major events in the life of the country, brought about by the revolutionary social and political changes that were taking place in Russia, by the establishment and development of a new outlook and moral code. These were complex processes, and writers who had chosen historical and revolutionary themes could not but portray them. Withal, they had to take into account the specific nature and quality of the revolutionary changes in each given area of the country. Thus, something that was typical of the Don area, inhabited by Cossaks, did not agree exactly with the pattern of life of the Russian peasantry of Central Russia.

The specific conditions of Siberia had certainly influenced both the way of life of its people and their characters. The writers of the past were aware of this, as we see from their work. N. Polevoi, I. Kalashnikov, D. Davydov and M. Zagoskin, among others, were all early literary discoverers of Siberia. The writers who followed were world-famous. In 1891, V. Mikheyev, a Siberian author, said, "Of late, Siberia has inspired many talented writers. Siberians will never forget Dostoyevsky, Uspensky, Korolenko, Matchtet, Mamin and others.... Anyone who has read their Siberian stories will understand what it was that inspired them here: man in conditions of utter desolation, on the one hand, and, on the other, man resisting the primeval forces of nature, fighting against overwhelming odds.... Humaneness and vigor are Siberian themes in literature."

Writing from the great Yenisei River during his journey to Sakhalin Island, Anton Chekhov described the striking contrast between its breadth and the unleashed forces of

nature, and the poverty-stricken existence of the people. However, he believed that in the near future theirs would become a happy and cheerful life, as was only befitting people who inhabited such vast and verdant expanses.

This time arrived. It did not come of its own accord, but was brought about through the revolutionary struggle and selfless toil of those who had challenged the tsarist regime and the rule of capital. Writers born of the revolution were to describe this heroic struggle and the years of creative toil which followed. These writers were former Red Army men, partisans, teachers, workers and Siberian peasants. They became known throughout the country. To name but a few, these were V. Shyshkov, Vsevolod Ivanov, K. Sedykh, S. Sartakov, G. Markov and S. Zalygin.

With the appearance of Anatoly Ivanov's novels *Morning Glory* and *Shadows Disappear at Noon* it became clear that yet another original Siberian writer had joined the ranks of Russian Soviet literature. Moreover, he immediately won nation-wide acclaim.

The question naturally arises as to what the discerning modern reader finds of such interest in his books, especially since there already exists a considerable library of Siberian novels.

This can perhaps best be explained by the fact that Anatoly Ivanov brought the world of a new Siberia to the reading public, a keen appraisal of the social and moral problems of contemporaneity which he views from the vantage point of great historical advances and, firstly, the history of the Russian Revolution.

In replying to a reader's question about the background of the novel *The Eternal Call*, Anatoly Ivanov said, "I believe that any book is born as a result of a writer's contemplation of life and the processes taking place in society.

"Our times are a time of gigantic, basic revolutionary changes.

"Our history is dramatic and heroic. All truth, the everyday truth, and especially all social truths, are at times not easy to accept. Naturally, there are people who can immediately grasp even the most complex socio-historic phenomena, but many can only understand these truths

after severe emotional shocks. Then again, there are instances when in order to understand a basic truth a person must pay the greatest price of all: his life.

"Such were my approximate thoughts on the essence of our complex lives and the reason I wrote *The Eternal Call*."

These complex problems of the establishment of new social relationships which in turn changed the individual were reflected in his first novel, *Morning Glory*, and were continued and further developed in his next two books, *Shadows Disappear at Noon* and *The Eternal Call*.

As to the chronological boundaries of his novel, it is clear cut: the pre-revolutionary years, the years of revolution and Civil War, collectivization, the Great Patriotic War and the present day.

However, Anatoly Ivanov does not simply record the passage of time and events. He studies the evolution of the new society and new type of man in Siberia. In *The Eternal Call*, for instance, he creates memorable characters, representatives of the working class, who toil so heroically in a defense plant in Siberia during the Great Patriotic War.

Anatoly Ivanov creates characters whom history itself has drawn into a bitter socio-political conflict, one in which the individual must of needs reveal the innermost workings of his soul.

Naturally, a writer cannot bypass a period of apprenticeship in his development. In the case of Anatoly Ivanov such were his early stories and essays. However, it is always important to pass through an apprenticeship to true maturity. This means gaining experience and finding one's place in life, which cannot be separated from the lives of one's countrymen.

The novels of Ivanov reflect the writer's readings of the world classics, as well as his own wealth of experience, for the life he led was not an easy one.

As a rule, a short biographical commentary reveals little of actual past experience. Although Ivanov was too young to be called up during the past war, it left an irradicable mark upon him, for it was a people's war and, therefore, everyone was mobilized, both those at the fighting fronts and those on the home front, no less affected by the

hardships of a war that had been thrust upon their native land. Teenage boys who had taken their fathers' places as the heads of families, who had gone to work in the factories, in the mines and in the fields matured quickly. Anatoly Ivanov shared his contemporaries' experience, for he, too, was a young boy during the war.

At a readers' conference devoted to a discussion of his novel *Morning Glory*, Ivanov spoke about himself.

"I was born in Kazakhstan, near the Altai Territory. The way of life there is Siberian, and the people are Siberians.

"I lived there until I was seventeen and graduated from secondary school. Then I entered the School of Journalism of Alma Ata University. My first job was on the staff of the *Priirtyshskaya Pravda* in Semipalatinsk. I was later offered the job of editor-in-chief of a newspaper in Novosibirsk Region. I consider the day I agreed to take it a happy one, because it was to provide much of the background material I needed for my novel.

"While working on the paper I did a lot of travelling through the districts of the region, visiting the various collective farms. These trips gave me my first story plots. In 1956 I published my first small collection of short stories, entitled *Alka's Songs*. I then began working on *Morning Glory*. This brings us up-to-date."

It also makes one point clear: socially-useful work forms the basis of a writer's life, bringing him into contact with reality, shaping his character. Anatoly Ivanov had worked in the fields as a boy, learning first-hand the philosophical meaning of life and the social innovations brought about by the Revolution. The essence of this philosophy is that man's true nature is seen in his deeds, not his intentions. The social innovations revealed the true humanitarian relationships among people who were, prior to the Revolution, oppressed by class and social inequalities and inhibited with prejudice. The new social relationships opened wide the doors leading to science and the arts to many working-class and peasant children who would one day become the pride of the nation.

Ivanov says that if not for Soviet power he would hardly have received an elementary education, to say nothing

of becoming a writer.

While still a boy his father died. His widowed mother, who had three children to support, was able to do this, because she was aided by her neighbors and the local Soviet. Ivanov took this inherent human kindness as a criteria in judging people. He launches his attacks against the evil that was nurtured in people by the harsh laws of private property relationships in the past from the point of view of human kindness in its social and moral aspects. This is true of *Morning Glory* and *Shadows Disappear at Noon*.

In undertaking a novel about the present, Anatoly Ivanov soon felt a need to delve into the past, to describe the crippling force of private ownership, for there it was not a vestige of some previous period, but a basic law of human relationships, eroding people's souls.

In the novel *Morning Glory* the reader follows the lives of three generations of the Borodin family. The action begins during the First World War in a remote Siberian village in the taiga.

Ivanov described the essence of the novel in a reply to one of his readers as follows:

"I tried in my novel to make it clear, first of all, as to how some people, the last of the Mohicans of the old world, rent by their overwhelming greed, undergo change in our new socialist society. These people, like Grigory Borodin in the novel, often retained close ties with the soil. They knew how to work well, and if they had understood the meaning and significance of the revolutionary times they would have been able to do much good for society and, therefore, for themselves. Therein lies the rub, however. Many were incapable of discerning its great meaning and were stricken by their fatal disease, perishing as individuals."

It would seem that this is a traditional theme in Russian literature, one which many Soviet writers have developed. Anatoly Ivanov discloses its tragic depths. The establishment of the new way of life becomes a truly heroic deed.

This heroic quality is not realized in definite major figure, but is to be found in the new way of life which the

people of the village, guided by the local Communists, are building together with the entire Soviet people in the face of the resistance of the overt and disguised enemies of Soviet power. Having established this new way of life, they then defended it from the fascist invaders during the Great Patriotic War.

Shadows Disappear at Noon is also devoted to the struggle for the establishment of a new social system in a Siberian village. Ivanov said that he wanted "to follow the transformation of class enemies under the present social system". He thus created Serafima Klychkova and Konstantin Zhukov, both heirs of gold-mine tycoons and enemies of Soviet power who went into hiding.

What is needed is not simply the force of historical progress to overcome this world of shadows but intelligence, a clear conscience and truth. These qualities of a new type of person living in a socialist society are to be found in the novel's main characters.

Ivanov never reduces the load he places on his characters, and that is why we follow their difficult road to happiness so closely, a road they do not comprehend otherwise than as the happiness of their people, for only thus can a man achieve his personal happiness.

Thus, quite naturally, the writer turned to the idea of the eternal and powerful call to the kind of life in which man finally achieves his true stature among the ranks of his fellow citizens, all of whom are equals, and establishes himself as an individual, as a human being who has come to understand his own worth. This is most vividly presented in *The Eternal Call*, for which Anatoly Ivanov was awarded a State Prize in 1971.

Here, as in his previous novels, the writer portrays the evolution of the popular nature of the Revolution in Russia, where the ideas and dreams of the working people were taken to heart by the Bolsheviks and given a scientific, Marxist analysis of contemporaneity in the works of V. I. Lenin.

For the first time Ivanov has presented in its historic entirety and concreteness an all-encompassing portrayal of the role played by the Russian proletariat, led by the party Lenin headed, during the first Russian and October Revo-

lutions, the Civil War, the first five-year plans and the Great Patriotic War. The novel also received the All-Union Trade Union Prize and the Writers' Union Prize as one of the best books about the working class and its creative, historic mission.

In portraying the life of the Savelievs, who live in a large Siberian village, a family caught up in the revolutionary events, as were millions of other families in Russia, the writer creates memorable portraits of the three Saveliev brothers, of staunch Communists like Subbotin, Kruzhilin and others. Their lives reach out towards the lives of many others, towards the fate of the people. Kruzhilin's remarks on man's place in life and his goals are the cornerstone of this book.

All of Ivanov's work, and especially *The Eternal Call*, point to his fundamental grasp of history. He has presented a very truthful picture of the life, customs and mores of Siberia early in the 20th century and during the first years after the Revolution. The action takes us back and forth from village life to the site of an evacuated defense plant, while the characters are vivid and three-dimensional, made real by the writer's deep understanding of the existing social forces. This is why the Communists, Red partisans, hunters, tillers, Party leaders and working people are all so realistic.

No matter what Anatoly Ivanov's subject, he remains faithful to his own outlook on life: the Russian Revolution was brought about by the anguish of the people in the past. It was born of the people's struggle for land, for freedom and happiness. This understanding of the truth of our way of life has made him the writer he is.

Boris Leonov

PROLOGUE

On a June day in 1908 two men were talking in the detention cell of the Tomsk gendarmerie. These were Inspector Lakhnovsky, a short man of about thirty-five with a stubby, obtuse nose, and Kosorotov, the chief warden, an untidy man with a large, protruding jaw.

The inspector was sitting at his desk in his undershirt, drinking tea. It was a hot day. His tunic hung suspended from the back of his chair. Kosorotov was officiating. The tea towel draped over his arm only heightened his resemblance to a tavern waiter.

Lakhnovsky set his empty cup down on the tray and said, "I've heard about your application. So you want to be transferred to the Alexandrov Central Prison?"

"It's my cherished dream, sir. Ever since I was a boy."

"It's good to have a dream. And dreams should come true."

"Remember, sir, you promised to put in a good word for me, if I did well?"

"Yes, and I will. I'll be sorry to lose you, but diligence and faithful service should be rewarded." Lakhnovsky moved the tray and the tea dishes away. "Well, let's get back to your Novonikolayevsk neighbors. How'd you manage to track them down?"

"Well, Arnold Mikhailovich, it was like this. I was on my way to the picture show, and whenever I walk down a street I keep my eyes and ears open. I spotted two men turning into the street up ahead. They were walking pretty fast. I could tell something was fishy. Then one of them looked back over his shoulder. That did it! It was Pyotr Polipov from back home! And who was that with him? Sure enough, Anton Savelyev! They were both prisoners in Novonikolayevsk back in 1905 when I was a warden there. What the hell are they doing in Tomsk, I said to

myself. So I blew my whistle."

"All right. Good for you. Bring them in one at a time." Lakhnovsky slipped his tunic over his shoulders and lit a cigarette. The smoke curled up and out through the small barred window.

Two minutes later Kosorotov prodded Anton Savelyev into the cell from the corridor. Anton had on a creased jacket. A shock of blond hair protruded from under his cap. His sullen, hostile blue eyes glared at the inspector. And yet, at the same time, they seemed to be mocking him. Lakhnovsky dragged on his cigarette as he walked over, smiled wryly and nodded towards the desk and the two slim gray folders. "I had your file sent over from the Novonikolayevsk gendarmerie. Well? Are you still going to play the fool?"

* * *

Anton Savelyev had turned eighteen but a month before. He had gotten married on that day. His bride was Liza Zakharova, the only child of Nikandr Zakharov, a Novonikolayevsk socialist who had been killed in March 1905 while attempting to escape from the Alexandrovsk Central Prison.

Anton had been born and raised in Mikhailovka Village, Shantara Volost, which was about a hundred and fifty miles from Novonikolayevsk. People who knew them said his father, Silanty Savelyev, was poorer than a church-mouse. Anton did not know what the expression meant, because there was no church in their village and, therefore, no church mice, either.

Anton was an unruly boy. He often battered his younger brothers Fyodor and Ivan, and lorded it over all the other boys of the village. Who knows how Anton would have turned out if his father's younger brother, Mitrofan, a carpenter, had not come home on a visit from Novonikolayevsk in the spring of 1904.

"Would you take Anton back to town with you for a space?" Silanty said. "Maybe you can teach him your trade. His ma and me can't do nothing with him. He's

running wild here and will sure enough get himself in trouble. I hear he's got himself some friends among the horse-thieves, and they've taught him to play cards."

Anton liked his new life in Novonikolayevsk, but he refused to learn the carpenter's trade. He spent his days wandering about the streets, getting to know all the ruffians and playing cards with them. He learned how to clean out the pockets of drunks in the streets outside the taverns and was beaten many a time for this. Then he suddenly broke away from this kind of life and found himself a new hobby. He began catching birds in the nearby woods and selling them at the market or trading them for sweet cakes with Petya Polipov, the neighborhood shopkeeper's son. Anton didn't care for sweets. He traded them for skinny-legged Liza, "the convict's daughter", as she was known in town.

Liza was as thin as a rail. She had arched black brows, was about fourteen and lived on his street. Her mother, who was forever coughing and probably had tuberculosis, was employed at the local soapworks. Anton took an interest in Liza only because she was a convict's daughter.

"I wonder why her father was convicted? I'll bet he murdered somebody," he decided.

He once spoke of this to his cousin Grigory, who was a stoker at the roundhouse. Grigory, his uncle Mitrofan's son, was a tall, brawny, large-eyed young man who always smelled of smoke and soot, but he was a very cheerful person and often took Anton fishing. In general, his attitude towards Anton was very friendly and he treated him as an equal.

"Nikandr Zakharov was searching for the truth. That's why they slapped him into irons," Grigory said. He looked at Anton keenly and added. "He's a socialist."

"What's a socialist? "

"A revolutionary."

"Then what's a revolutionary? "

Grigory laughed. For some reason or other he winked at Anton. "Would you really like to know? Well, some day you will. All in good time."

Anton soon discovered that Grigory, Uncle Mitrofan and even his wife Ulyana were all revolutionaries, although

they did their best to conceal the fact from him. When they realized that he knew they wanted to send him back to his parents. Aunt Ulyana was determined they would do so, and he probably would have been sent back if not for Grigory.

"I can't understand what you're driving at, Dad," Grigory said one evening. His voice was angry as he picked up the deck of cards his mother had taken from Anton and brandished it in the air. "Do you want him to slide down this road? The farther he'll go, the worse it'll get. Can't you see he's at an age when his head is full of adventure. We've got to help him! "

But Grigory, the ever-cheerful Grigory, who had so objected to Anton being sent back to the village, was mortally wounded by gendarmes that very day, not more than half an hour later, while accepting a consignment of illegal political pamphlets from another revolutionary at a small station in the suburbs. That evening he died in Anton's arms. His last words were, "If you go to search for the truth, Anton, there'll be nothing but prison and hard labor ahead and maybe ... an end like this ... Will you go? "

"Yes."

"You won't be scared? "

"No."

"That's the right way."

"I'll be just like you! "

"I know you will...."

Anton was imprisoned for the first time in his life but a short while later. Liza and he, and even Pyotr Polipov were arrested, despite the fact that Pyotr's father was a prosperous shopkeeper.

A bond of friendship had been established between Pyotr and Anton, and the only cloud to cast a shadow on it appeared when they both eventually fell in love with Liza. It is difficult to say what Pyotr saw in her, because she was not a pretty girl. Her eyes, as green as water, were her best feature. Something restless and compelling sparkled deep within them. Anton was attracted by her boldness and daring, although this was a trait one could never suspect from the looks of her. Still and all, at the age of fourteen or fifteen she had travelled to far-off Tomsk

on many occasions, bringing back illegal political pamphlets and even arms.

Liza favored neither Anton nor Pyotr, and until the very last moment they did not know which of them she would choose. Anton felt that Pyotr's chances were much better, especially after they were released from prison. They had all been imprisoned late in October of 1905: Anton, Liza, Pyotr, Ivan Mikhailovich Subbotin, a veteran revolutionary and leader of the Novonikolayevsk chapter of the RSDLP, who had staged an escape from the Alexandrovsk Central Prison together with Liza's father in March of that year. Friends provided papers for Subbotin made out to Kuzma Churkin and found him a job as a dishwasher in the Novonikolayevsk prison kitchen. Working in the kitchen gave Churkin-Subbotin an opportunity to organize the escape of a group of political prisoners. The prison was raided during the October strike on the day the railroad workers, now headed by Mitrofan after his son Grigory's death, staged an unheard-of political demonstration. However, Cossacks and regular troops were called in. They broke up the demonstration and were able to arrest the organizers of the intended escape of political prisoners.

That day Churkin-Subbotin gave Anton and Pyotr Polipov their first real revolutionary assignment. Anton was to go to a small distant station, receive a satchel of cartridges from an elderly switchman and deliver it to an appointed spot in the woods outside the town by ten o'clock in the morning. This was reserve ammunition. Pyotr Polipov would then deliver the cartridges to the assault group in town if necessary. Polipov was a pupil of a private secondary school and would be able to carry them across town in his school satchel without arousing suspicion. However, Anton felt hurt because he had not been included in the assault group and, moreover, had not even been entrusted with delivering the cartridges to them. That was why he headed straight from the railroad station to the group's assembly point.

Subbotin was enraged by such a lack of discipline, even though they did need the cartridges and Pyotr had been sent to the woods for them.

The preliminary investigation of the case of the

demonstrators and prison raid organizers dragged on for over a year. For some time the prisoners were kept in separate cells. Then they were brought together in a common cell, with police informers planted among them. Pyotr Polipov especially was given a hard time. He was called in for questioning more often than the others and was often beaten, although it was against the law to inflict bodily punishment on political prisoners. An exception was made for Polipov, apparently in the hope that the pampered son of a wealthy shopkeeper would break down. But he did not. He did not betray anyone and in the end Subbotin said,

“Our Pyotr is made of the real stuff. We could use more young men like him.”

Despite the scanty evidence, Anton, Liza and Pyotr were each sentenced to two years of imprisonment, Mitrofan to two and a half and Churkin-Subbotin, as an escaped political prisoner, to eight years of hard labor. However, when the group of convicts who were being transported halted to rest, Subbotin managed to escape. He returned to Novonikolayevsk, where he immediately set about re-establishing the local chapter of the RSDLP that had been smashed in 1905.

Upon his release, Anton got a job as a loader at the local sawmill. Liza, as before, favored neither Anton nor Pyotr. Her mother had died while she had been in prison. Liza was finally able to get a job at the soap works. Anton and Pyotr often took turns meeting her there after work and walking her home. One day, to end this state of uncertainty, Anton decided to speak up. He had difficulty finding the right words, but Liza would not let him speak.

“Don’t! Don’t say anything!” she cried, putting her rough hand over his mouth. Then she buried her burning face in his shoulder.

“But ... What about Pyotr?” he said stupidly.

“What about him? He’s all right, I guess, but I don’t know. I don’t care for him. I never did. He’s so educated, and I’m.... You tell him yourself. Tell him not to call for me any more.”

Pyotr listened in silence when Anton told him. His

They fell into the soft grass and kissed, and caressed each other again, as if the night had been too short. Then they made a campfire and put a kettle on to boil. As they sat gazing at the fire, Anton said,

"You know, Liza, I made up a poem ... for you."

"You didn't." She couldn't believe it. "How'd you make it up? "

"I don't know. I'll recite it for you."

As he recited the eight lines hastily his face became crimson. Liza's eyes grew wider and wider.

"Did you ... I mean, all by yourself? "

"Yes."

"For me? "

"Um."

She was silent. They both felt a bit awkward. Suddenly she began to hum, putting the words she had just heard to a simple tune and then singing them without missing even one. "Anton! Oh, Anton! " Liza buried her head in his chest, feeling so happy that tears welled up in her eyes.

Soon Aunt Ulyana appeared, carrying a basket of food and wine. They spread a cloth on the grass and set out the simple fare. Guests began arriving singly and in pairs. The first to come was a very silent Pyotr Polipov. He was followed by a few workers from the roundhouse, some from the sawmill, the soapworks and the printshop. All were members of the underground city committee of the RSDLP. Last to arrive were Uncle Mitrofan and Subbotin.

As was the Russian custom, the guests shouted "*Gor'ko!* ", which meant that everything tasted bitter and that the bride and groom had to kiss to make it sweet. Pyotr sat off to a side, gripping his glass with both hands. Anton and Liza kissed shyly. Everyone, except Polipov, drank to their health. He kept clutching his glass in silence. Then he jerked his hand up and poured his drink down his throat. However, no one took any notice of his actions, because just then Subbotin sat up straight and said,

"Comrades. My friends, let's not waste time. I declare the meeting of the underground committee of the RSDLP open. There is only one question on the agenda: our plans for establishing an underground workers' newspaper."

* * *

"Well, are you going to talk or not?" Inspector Lakhnovsky repeated.

Steps faded away behind the closed door in back of Anton. He had learned to recognize Kosorotov's tread among all the others during his imprisonment in the Novonikolayevsk jail, for although Kosorotov was only thirty, his steps were the lumbering, shuffling steps of an old man.

"You might have said 'how do you do' to begin with," Anton replied.

"What was the purpose of your coming here to Tomsk?"

"I've already told you. I got married and wanted to rent an apartment and spend my honeymoon here. Polipov's my friend. He was going to help me find a place."

"You came here to re-establish your illegal ties with the Tomsk socialists."

Anton shrugged.

Lakhnovsky lit another cigarette. "I'd advise you to tell me the truth. Your so-called friend Polipov has confessed."

"Let's have a confrontation and we'll see. He has nothing to confess. And you'll be held responsible for keeping us here in detention illegally. I'm going to file a complaint."

"What?" the inspector came closer. He suddenly locked his arm around Anton's neck and brought his lighted cigarette up to his face as if he were going to jab it into his eye. "Why'd you come to Tomsk? Why'd you come to Tomsk?"

Anton pulled his head as far away as he could and tried to break free, but the inspector was a strong man. Finally, Anton grabbed his hand and twisted his arm. Lakhnovsky let go, doubled over and moaned. The sound seemed to further enrage Anton. Before realizing what he was doing, he swung and punched Lakhnovsky's fleshy chin, sending him reeling back to the desk as his tunic fell to the floor.

"Kosorotov! Guards! Throw him in the punishment cell!"

The gendarmes dragged Anton off. Kosorotov fussed about Lakhnovsky.

"How'd it happen, sir? Should I put a compress on it? Maybe some alum? "

"What are you talking about, you fool! Let's have the other one, that Polipov."

Unlike Anton Savelyev, Pyotr Polipov seemed glum, depressed. He slumped against the wall and gazed blankly at the barred window. His round cheeks sagged and his eyelids were puffy. He had obviously not slept well. Perhaps he had not even slept in several nights.

"Well, how do you do," Lakhnovsky said, buttoning his tunic up to the top and then sitting down at his desk. "Are you going to play dumb again? Sit down. What was your reason for coming to Tomsk? "

"I told you," Polipov replied unwillingly as he sat down. "My friend wanted to spend his honeymoon here, and I came along to help him find a place to stay."

"You should have thought of something better than that," the inspector said and made a face. "Who ever heard of a worker going on a honeymoon? "

Indeed, they were not good liars. Polipov rarely spoke to Anton after he was married. On the way to Tomsk they both seemed to feel guilty for some reason or other and, therefore, did not discuss what they were to do in case they were caught. At the very last moment, after Kosorotov had blown his whistle, Polipov spoke hastily, telling Anton to say he was on his honeymoon and looking for an apartment. This was the first thing that came to his mind. Now they were forced to explain their presence in Tomsk in this way so as not to become completely entangled in lies.

For several long moments Lakhnovsky gazed at his prisoner intently. Then he smiled wryly. "Look here, Polipov. Let's be frank. What the hell made you, the son of a man respected by society, go over to the socialists and rebels? What do you find of such interest among that filthy, penniless crowd? "

Polipov said nothing. He sat there staring at the floor. Lakhnovsky rose.

"All right, I can understand the intoxication of youth, and the halo of fighting for so-called justice. You've probably been reading Chernyshevsky and Herten, and Ple-

khanov. But you're a grown man now. You have a mind of your own. What do you need this justice for if it'll take away your father's, meaning yours, too, shop, house and money? "

Polipov's hands were lying on his lap. His stubby fingers trembled slightly. Lakhnovsky noted this.

"You've been under arrest before but, as they say, you got off easily. It was only out of consideration for your father. I hope you understand that you were handled with kid gloves. I'm saying this on the basis of what I read in your file and of my talks with Warden Kosorotov. He was a warden at the Novonikolayevsk prison at the time. Do you want to land in jail again? To be humiliated, to spend the best years of your life behind bars? To perhaps ruin your health and even lose your life in prison? You'll be rotting away in a cell, while there, on the outside, the sun will be shining, there'll be a good life, wine, and women. Yes, women, dammit! As for the revolution, it's been strangled and wrecked for good. It's about time you realized that. When I say for good, I mean for good." Lakhnovsky came to stand over Polipov. He lit another cigarette. "Are you married? "

"No."

"Do you have a girl? "

"No. I thought I did, but I don't any more."

"Did she deceive you? "

"If you have to know, she married somebody else! "

"Who? "

"The devil! Satan! It's none of your business! "

Lakhnovsky was by no means a fool. He was also a good psychologist. "Aha," he drawled. "She didn't marry your friend by any chance, did she? "

Polipov's mouth twitched, and he averted his head.

"I see. So they've taken your sweetheart away, too, have they? It's just like them! And you gave her up? Without a fight? Like the lowest ... and didn't even try to win her back? "

"Stop it! "

There was good reason why Lakhnovsky was valued in the gendarmerie. Before Polipov had a chance to realize what was happening, the inspector had locked his arm

around his neck, as he had previously done to Anton, and raised his burning cigarette to his nose, as if he were about to jab it into his eye. "Why'd you come to Tomsk? Why'd you come to Tomsk? Why'd you come to Tomsk?" he demanded.

Polipov jerked and screamed. Lakhnovsky let him go.

"So you don't even want to try and win her back. The woman you love?" he said, examining the glowing tip of his cigarette. "Not even with our help? Or have you stopped loving her?"

Polipov stood by the wall. He could not control his trembling. "What do I have to do?" he said brokenly.

"Tell me why you came to Tomsk."

Polipov thrust his fists into his pockets, took them out and plunged them back again. "How many.... How long will he be in jail? I mean, Savelyev." He forced the words out and averted his eyes, for he was too ashamed to look at the inspector.

"That all depends on his reason for coming to Tomsk. At any rate, we'll keep him safely behind bars for at least five years."

Polipov's eyes darted furtively around the sparsely furnished cell and he moaned, "No! No! I lied! Everything I said was a lie!"

Lakhnovsky smiled broadly and nearly amiably. "Don't you find your behavior rather silly?"

Polipov sagged.

"That's just what I mean. I always respect men who can control their emotion. And so?"

"On one condition only. That I'll be above suspicion. Otherwise it's not worth it." Polipov was still avoiding the inspector's eyes.

"Mmm. I have one condition also. We'll put you in jail for a few months. I hope you understand the necessity of this. You'll be put in with the political prisoners and will inform us regularly of what they say, their plans and contacts on the outside. After your release you'll go on being active in your Party organization and will inform the local gendarmerie in detail of its actions."

"Stop! That's enough." Polipov was shaking.

"Come, sit down." Lakhnovsky offered him a chair.

He then sat down at his desk and took out a sheet of blank paper. "To begin with, there are several questions. Who are the leaders of your underground chapter of the RSDLP? I want their names, aliases and secret meeting places. One Churkin, whose real name is Subbotin and who is an escaped convict, is in hiding in Novonikolayevsk. Where is he hiding? And, of course, what was the purpose of your coming to Tomsk? "

"We came here to get some parts for the underground printing press," Polipov said in a dull voice. "The printshop is located in the basement of...."

After Polipov had relieved himself of all he knew, he fell silent. Lakhnovsky continued writing for a while. When he had finished he raised his head and looked at the solemn man sitting opposite. An expression of distaste came to the inspector's eyes and was gone just as quickly.

"Do you know what I've been thinking about?" he said. "To hell with the gendarmerie. You'll be exposed sooner or later if you have anything to do with them. This is what we'll do: I'll give you an address and a code, and you'll send me your reports from Novonikolayevsk signed with an alias. Then no one except I will know of your ... patriotic work for your country. Try hard, Polipov, and you'll make out very well."

* * *

On a December day of 1912, Kosorotov, accompanied by two junior wardens, was proceeding along the northern, darkest corridor of the Alexandrov Central Prison. A heavy ring of keys was suspended from his broad leather belt. Kosorotov stopped to look through the peephole of each cell and checked each lock. He suddenly noticed that one of the junior wardens' shirt had come out of his belt. "You! Hayseed! You country bumpkin! Suck in your stomach! "

"Yessir, sir! " the warden, a young man of about twenty, said, snapping to attention.

"Hm." Kosorotov was appeased by this exhibition of total devotion. "I want you to look your parade best

during my watches! ” Then, turning on his rage once again, he bellowed, “You know where you are? You’re on guard in the Alexandrov Central Prison for convicts! And who are you supposed to guard? Our country’s worst political criminals, that’s who! Convicts who’ve escaped from all sorts of other places, and not just once, either.”

“He’s new, sir,” the other warden, a man with graying moustache who also looked like a former peasant, said, standing up for the younger one. “He’ll do better.”

“Look it what they send me for guards here,” Kosorotov grumbled as he cooled off a bit. “I want to see you in the wardroom after your watch. What’s your name? ”

The young warden never replied, because at that very moment an iron door clanged open at the far end of the corridor. This was followed by the sound of jingling spurs and cleated boots pounding towards them.

“Guard! Take in a new prisoner! ” a voice thundered.

Kosorotov trotted off down the corridor to return a few minutes later. As he bustled happily about a man in irons whose face was covered with a heavy beard he crooned, “Happy days! The Lord has brought you back to me! ”

“Hello there, neighbor,” the prisoner replied and also smiled. He was weary and advanced along the corridor slowly, supporting his heavy chains and obviously pleased at the moist, stuffy warmth of the prison.

“We’ll find you a real good cell! A good small, stuffy one,” Kosorotov said, still bustling about as happily as before. “How’s life been treating you, boy? ”

“Not bad. I’ve no complaints. I escaped from exile in Kirensk, and from hard labor in Akatui. They showed me around Zerentui prison a while back, but I didn’t like the looks of the place, and so I broke out of there, too.”

“Yah, you’ve had a hard time, sonny.”

“I see your dream’s come true.”

“I did my best.”

“You’ve had a rare bit of luck. Look at the palace you’ve got here. It’s no match for our dump of a jail back in Novonikolayevsk.”

The prisoner was Anton Savelyev. In the intervening years he had matured and become broad-shouldered. His



cropped hair seemed blonder and his large forehead was marked by two shallow furrows.

Kosorotov beamed as he gazed at Anton. "What the devil am I standing here for! I'll bet you're all in after such a journey. Come on in here, boy." Kosorotov unlocked a cell door. "Here she is, the darkest and dampest we've got."

"Thanks. I thank you kindly."

"Think nothing of it. After all, we come from the same village."

"I'm really sorry to put you to all this trouble, but I won't be here long."

"Don't be in a hurry on our account. We won't kick you out."

"How much is two times two? "

"Four, I'd say."

"Well then, I'll break out in about four months, as soon as it's spring again. It's too cold out now, and I need to rest up."

"Ha, you sure are a joker," Kosorotov said and beamed broadly. All of a sudden he became very stern and said, "Go on, get in! ", shoved Anton into the cell, locked it and crossed himself fervently. Then once again something akin to a smile touched his face. "The Good Lord had seen fit to send us wardens a bit of joy, too."

Suddenly Anton pounded on his side of the door. Kosorotov opened the little window.

"What's the matter? Don't you like your new cell? "

"I like it fine. But I've forgotten to tell you my good news. I have a son. Hear me? A son! "

* * *

The Whiteguard Czech uprising in Novonikolayevsk began on the night of May 26, 1918. On that day Anton Savelyev, a member of the Tomsk Gubernia Executive Committee of the Soviet of Deputies, was on board a train from Moscow, where he had attended the Congress of Commissars of Labor.

Anton had been elected the Gubernia Commissar a few

months before. He had gone to Tomsk alone, having temporarily left Liza and their son Yura in Novonikolayevsk. On his way to Moscow he wrote Liza a letter, saying that he had finally found a place for them in Tomsk and would come for her and Yura on his way back from Moscow. On board the train from Moscow he sent Liza a telegram, telling her to be at the station in Novonikolayevsk with their belongings on the evening of May 26th.

When Liza received his letter she resigned from her job as secretary of the local Soviet and spent the whole day of May 26th packing.

Novonikolayevsk Station was jammed with Czech troop trains. Officers kept dashing in and out of the station house, slamming the doors behind them. The red flag above the station house roof, wet from the recent rain, flapped feebly, like wounded bird's wing.

When darkness fell, a thin, glum-looking man with a sharp nose and wearing a worn leather jacket appeared on the dimly-lit station square. He was accompanied by a dozen armed Red Guardsmen.

A patrol turned into the square and approached them. The plump Czech officer in charge ran towards them shouting, "Where are you going? Stop! Go back! "

"We're on a special mission," the man in the leather jacket replied dully and handed him a piece of paper.

The Czech officer shined his flashlight on it and read it over slowly. He sounded surprised as he said, "Oho! This is Mister Grishin-Almazov's signature! But you can't enter the station house. There's a meeting there now. Can I offer you a cigarette, Mr. Sviridov? "

Sviridov refused.

A few minutes later Polipov appeared on the square. He, too, wore a leather jacket and also looked glum, and somehow shabby. "Well? " he said, coming up to Sviridov.

"The Czech troops all along the line have received their orders," Sviridov said in an undertone. "In half-an-hour's time we'll be in control of the post office, the telegraph, the pier, the local Soviet, Cheka and Uyezd Committee. But why are you here? You'd better go."

Polipov first encountered Sviridov while in the Novonikolayevsk prison in 1906. At the time Sviridov was a

member of the Tomsk Committee of the RSDLP, which consisted entirely of Mensheviks. He spent most of his time in the common cell carrying on heated political arguments with Subbotin. One day Mitrofan Savelyev, who had listened to their arguments, said, "I'll tell you something, Sviridov. In about five years from now, or maybe even sooner, you're going to be a paid informer of the tsarist gendarmerie."

Polipov had not seen Sviridov since then, but he knew that he had broken away from the Mensheviks upon his release and had joined the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP. Then, after Soviet power was established, Sviridov turned up in Novonikolayevsk as the commissar of a small Red Guard detachment.

"How come you've fallen so low, Sviridov?" Polipov had jested at the time.

"I see that you've climbed very high, though," Sviridov had replied unpleasantly. He had reeked of vodka.

After the establishment of Soviet power in Novonikolayevsk, Polipov became a member of the revolutionary tribunal. Lakhnovsky had not gotten in touch with him since the February Revolution and Polipov, naturally, had no intention of looking for him. Sometimes he wished hopefully that the inspector might have perished in the holocaust. That was his greatest desire.

Sviridov had humped in to him recently on the street and invited Polipov to his house. There, having sent his wife and thirteen-year daughter off to the kitchen, he had winced and stroked his stomach as he said, "Soviet power is doomed. It won't last another week. An underground Provisional Siberian government was formed in Novonikolayevsk a long time ago, and it's gathering its forces for a decisive blow. The Czech troops will support us. I'm speaking to you frankly, because.... In a word, I'm speaking to you on orders from Lakhnovsky. The former inspector is a close acquaintance of mine. Unfortunately."

Polipov was astounded. "Who are you?"

"Naturally, we'll try to catch our enemies unawares," Sviridov continued, ignoring the question, "but I don't think we'll be able to arrest everyone at a stroke. That's why.... In a word, you're to go into hiding. But keep your

eyes open to see where the others will be hiding out. I'm sure you realize that this information, even if it's just a guess, will be extremely useful. You'll be in contact with me and no one else, as you were with Lakhnovsky."

"But where's Arnold Mikhailovich now? "

"At the moment he's in prison in Tomsk."

So they had not forgotten about him. Polipov the informer was to take up again where he had left off.

The last Czech troops left the station square. The low windows of the little station house gleamed softly and ever cozily. Nothing hinted at the fact that in a few minutes' time the town would be drowned in blood.

"I said, what're you doing here? " Sviridov demanded.

"What'll happen to Liza? I know you're waiting for the Moscow train so you can arrest Anton. I told you he'll be on it. But Liza! Leave her alone. Please."

"Your nerves are going to pot, comrade Polipov," Sviridov said and smirched. "You haven't lost hope yet, have you? It's high time you did."

Indeed, it was. Liza had been married for ten years and had a growing son. Although, all told, she had not lived with her husband for more than a year or a year-and-a-half at the most. Anton had spent the remainder of those ten years behind bars or in hiding after yet another escape. The February Revolution had won him a release from the mines of Siberia, and after the October Revolution he had gone to Tomsk.

Polipov would smile bitterly at times. What had he hoped for when he had agreed to become a traitor ten years before? And yet, he could not give up hope. He knew full well and had known for years that it was all a pipe-dream, yet clung to it. He was still a bachelor, living a comfortless, unsettled life, all alone in his parents' large and echoing house. He did not know where his parents were, nor whether they were still alive. After the local bank had been nationalized, his father, who apparently had considerable valuables there, became morose and took on a bent and haggard appearance. In January 1918 he abandoned his house and empty shops and left town toge-

ther with his wife, having sent his son the following letter: "Damn all of you. And you, my dear son, above all."

Polipov was actually glad that his father had gone. It was a load off his shoulders, for sooner or later he would have had to do something about his parents. But now, if the uprising were successful, his parents would return. They would learn the truth about him, and his father would take back his words.

Sviridov kept glancing nervously at his watch. They heard a train whistle in the distance and then the clatter of the approaching wheels.

All of a sudden they heard a child singing in a side street leading to the square:

*We did not gain our freedom
By prayers, but with guns....*

Polipov recognized the voice. It was Liza's son, Yura. A few moments later he came into view. He was wearing a freshly pressed shirt and his hair was slicked down. Liza and Aunt Ulyana followed, carrying suitcases and bundles.

"Pyotr! " Liza exclaimed. Her eyes burned anxiously. "I'm glad you came to meet Anton."

"I came to see you off."

"What's going on? There are Czech troops on the streets."

"Don't worry. They're going to the bathhouse," Sviridov replied.

Ulyana set down a heavy bundle. "Goodness! Where's Mitrofan? He promised to be here. He spends all his time in that Cheka of his."

Mitrofan Savelyev, a former carpenter, was assigned to the Cheka after the October Revolution and now spent his days and many of his nights there. He had not been home for three days and had sent a messenger over that afternoon to say he would be at the station to meet his nephew's train.

"What are we standing here for, Liza? " Aunt Ulyana said, grabbing up her bundles. "There's the train."

"You can't go into the station. Anton will come out here," Sviridov said.

"What do you mean? Who are you? "

Sviridov turned away. Polipov grabbed Liza's hands fervently. "Well, goodbye. And ... I wish you luck." His hands were hot and sweaty and they trembled. His mouth twitched. He strode off into the darkness without looking back once.

All that followed happened very quickly. There was a great commotion on the platform. Men shouted orders in a foreign tongue. Soon a crowd of passengers came pouring out through the gates. Then somewhere very close at hand in the city shooting broke out and ceased just as suddenly.

"What is it? What's happening?" Liza cried.

"Nothing special. Our men are getting rid of our enemies," Sviridov replied and smirked again.

"Which enemies? Who are they? And who are you? I'm sure I've seen you before."

He did not reply.

Anton appeared unexpectedly, bobbing out of the crowd. "Liza! Yura!" He swung his son up and hugged him. Then he embraced his wife. "Liza! What's going on here? What's all the shooting about? What's happening?"

"Nothing special," Sviridov repeated, coming up to Anton. "They're getting rid of Soviet power."

"Is that you, Sviridov?" Anton was taken aback. "What did you just say?"

Sviridov hesitated for a few moments. When he finally spoke it was listlessly and reluctantly, as it were. "Arrest him. And the women, too. And take the kid along, just in case."

* * *

The Whiteguard Czech security service had embarked on a reign of terror in the city. Men and women were being executed day and night in the woods beyond the river.

Three weeks had elapsed since the coup. Polipov had gone into hiding. He was living in the cellar of a house on the outskirts that belonged to Vasily Zasukhin, a middle-aged Novonikolayevsk cabbie and a veteran member of the RSDLP. Polipov hardly ever ventured forth from the cellar.

"We've let it slip away! That's what happened to our Soviet power here," Zasukhin said as he brought Polipov his meal one evening. "They've murdered most all of the city Party organization."

"No, they haven't. Here we are, you and I, and you say that Subbotin hasn't been caught, either. Take me to him. We've got to do something," Polipov insisted.

Zasukhin said nothing. He sat smoking on a stool, staring at the floor, filling the musty cellar with acrid smoke.

Subbotin appeared by himself one day. He had a three weeks' growth of beard, was wearing a worn pair of boots and an old cap of the kind the city cabbies wore.

"I'm glad to see you hale and hearty," he said, shaking Polipov's hand. "There are very few of us left. We've made you a member of the underground Party committee, Pyotr."

"At last! I was beginning to think I'd just go to seed here."

"There's no time to go to seed now. We have to muster the remnants of our forces. Actually, we have to begin from scratch again. And we will. A thousand times over! What do you think of Sviridov? I never really believed that he was sincere about breaking his ties with the Mensheviks. When he was in Tomsk one Party group after another failed. So many of our fine comrades were killed there. Now we know who was responsible for their murders. And now we come to the logical end: Sviridov's an interrogator in a Whiteguard Czech torture chamber, and he's doing his damndest. From what we've learned, he's been torturing Anton Savelyev with a vengeance. And his wife, too."

"Liza? Are they still alive?" Polipov turned pale. His voice cracked.

"I think they are. But Mitrofan Savelyev was killed." Subbotin rose. "We all have to get together soon to discuss the situation."

"When? Where?"

"Don't be so impatient."

"I'm sick and tired of rotting in this cellar."

"Vasily will tell you about the time and the place. Well, it's been good seeing you, Pyotr."

In the dead of night several days later Polipov was hurrying along deserted side streets, heading in the general direction of the railroad station and the fine house with heavy oaken shutters in which Sviridov now lived.

Sviridov's wife, a plump woman whose eyes were red-rimmed from crying, opened the door. Polipov had been certain he would find a guard posted outside the house, but there was none. The door had been opened the moment he had said whom it was he wanted to see. Nor had he been challenged. It all seemed very strange to him.

Polipov found Sviridov lying on his bed in his trousers and undershirt. He was drunk. There were two bottles, a glass and a dish of sour pickles on the table.

"Aha! Mister informer! I've been waiting for you. Well, what's the latest news? "

Polipov was both taken aback and frightened by Sviridov's tone of voice and words. "The underground Party committee is going to meet tomorrow. In the home of Kornei Baulin. He's a type-setter at the local printshop. The address is...."

"All right, all right. I know him. Have a drink."

"Look here, Sviridov! What does this mean? "

"Why, what's the matter? " Sviridov swung his legs over the side of the bed but did not get up.

"You've been drinking here like ... like a bum! And there's nobody to guard the place. You'd think this was peacetime or something. And besides...."

"Actually, I shouldn't be drinking. I've got gastritis. My insides feel like somebody's slicing me up with a razor." He rubbed his stomach. "But you're wrong. There is a guard."

"Listen, I've come here on business, and you're drunk as a lord! I'm sorry, but since this is the case, I'm leaving. I don't understand what's going on."

"Kulepanov! "

The door to the adjacent room opened and a White-guard soldier appeared. Another was standing behind him.

"Arrest this ... this ... take him over to our place! Give him a good working over and throw him into solitary," Sviridov said without even looking at Polipov. He went over to the table and filled his glass from one of the bottles.

* * *

Polipov really did not understand what was happening. He was taken to security service headquarters, severely beaten and thrown into a tiny cell.

Then everyone seemed to have forgotten about him. Kosorotov, a familiar face, and now the warden here, brought him a bowl of stinking gruel once a day and carried out the slop pail. He was as silent as the grave, never uttering a single word. One day Kosorotov took him down a long corridor and showed him into Sviridov's office.

The bruises were still fresh on Polipov's face. His right eyebrow had been cut and was swollen. The swelling covered most of his eye. As he stood by the door his left eye took in the large room. It contained a desk, a cupboard by the wall and another door that was padded with heavy gray felt.

Sviridov had on an officer's tunic from which the shoulder straps had been removed. He was standing by the window, looking out gloomily through the heavy bars. His deeply-lined face was pasty. His jowls hung loosely and his dry, cracked lips twitched.

"I'd appreciate some explanation," Polipov said sullenly.

"Bring in Anton Savelyev! " Sviridov muttered by way of reply. "And then his wife. And then his son."

"Yes, sir," Kosorotov replied and headed towards the door. He stopped at the threshold and added, "I want to warn you, sir. This is the third day she's refused to take any food. And she's begun talking sort of crazy like."

"Bring them in, for God's sake! " Sviridov bellowed.

As soon as Kosorotov was gone, Polipov took a step towards the door. "I'd like to be spared this, if you don't mind."

"Sit down! " Sviridov barked, indicating a chair by the wall. He went over to the cupboard and took out a bottle and a glass. When he poured his drink his hands shook, so that glass clinked against glass. He downed the vodka and exhaled loudly. "Why do you think a person lives in this world, Polipov? " he said unexpectedly. "What's the meaning of his being born and dying? Hm? And, in general,

what's truth, the real truth, and what's falsity? "

"This is a good time and place to discuss such things! "

"Why not? It's always a good time and place, if there's a need to."

"I didn't know you were such a philosopher. I can't say the same about myself though."

"Yes. Indeed. You're just a plain, common informer."

"Where am I supposed to be? " Polipov jumped up. "Why don't you tell me whether you've nabbed the underground committee or not? That's what I want to know."

"What's the use? " Sviridov shrugged. "If we wipe out one, another will pop up. It's an endless, useless chase."

"I can't seem to understand a thing." Polipov sat down again. His whole body was shaking. "I'm either stark, raving mad or...." His voice trailed off, because at that moment Kosorotov brought in Anton.

Savelyev had lost a lot of weight. His eyes were sunken and his skin was sallow. However, there were no visible signs of his having been beaten. The general impression was that of a man who was deathly tired.

Anton entered the room and looked around quickly. "Hello, Pyotr," he said softly. "So the police dogs have hounded you down, too? "

Polipov's heart froze. What if Sviridov told Anton the truth? But Sviridov simply smiled nervously with his lips alone.

Anton went over to the desk. His tread was the labored tread of an old man. He sat down on a chair and sniffed the air. "You've been drinking again, Sviridov? "

An unhealthy flame flickered in Sviridov's eyes and then burned brightly.

"I can't understand you, Sviridov," Anton continued. "Or, rather, I sometimes think there's a fire burning up your insides. Maybe it's the remains of your human conscience, or something squirming around inside of you that you're trying to drown by pouring vodka down your gullet."

"You've guessed it. He-he." Sviridov's laughter was brittle and dead.

"But then again, I say to myself that a sadist and torturer who's sunk lower than a beast can't have a conscience."

"You've guessed again, he-he." Sviridov turned green and exploded, "Yes! You've guessed! " He clenched his head and thrust his fingers into his hair, as if he wanted to yank it all out. "But that won't make things easier for you. Not one bit! "

"Yes, I know. You'll shoot us all. Me, and Liza. My whole family. Even Yura. You won't have any mercy for a child. But you can't shoot the entire population. You can't wipe out the whole nation. You can't put down the people."

"You don't say? " Sviridov chuckled. "You must be blind and deaf. Don't you know, don't you realize what's happening in Russia? Novonikolayevsk has fallen. We've taken Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg, Barnaul, Omsk, Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk. Japanese troops are in the Far East. The Cossack General Semyonov is in control of the Trans-Baikal region. The Cossack General Dutov is in command in the Southern Urals. The last Red troops are being mopped up in the Volga region. That's it! Soviet power lasted for exactly six months. Now you see it, now you don't! And you never will again."

"Oh, no! It was, is and will always be. Underground Party organizations have been set up. They're functioning right now in every city you named. They're organizing the people, and the people will soon squash you."

"We've been squashing you so far! "

"You won't be for long. You've started this reign of terror because you're so helpless. The day's not far off when the people will make you pay for the thousands you've tortured to death and shot! And you'll have to pay in full! "

"All right, we've had an intelligent conversation and that's enough! " Sviridov snapped. "The question is the same: who could the present members of the Tomsk underground Party committee be? "

"I don't know, Sviridov. You arrested me just before the Whiteguard Czechs took Tomsk. Besides, I was away in Moscow."

"I realize you can't be positive. But I'm sure you can come up with some names."

Polipov seemed useless and forgotten as he sat up

against the wall and followed the interrogation with a puzzled look. Why was Sviridov so anxious to find out the names of the Tomsk underground Party members while overlooking the ones right there in Novonikolayevsk? Or had Sviridov lied? Perhaps Subbotin and all the others were already in prison? Then, after he was done with Anton, he would begin calling the men in one by one to confront him. Yes, that's just what Sviridov was going to do! So that was why he had been taken to security headquarters. However, he could not understand why they had chosen such a strange way to do it nor why he had been beaten. The instant Polipov imagined Subbotin confronting him a few moments hence he broke out in a cold sweat. However, events did not turn out as he had imagined they would.

"So you won't talk?" Sviridov said.

"I'm no traitor," Anton replied.

"You're going to be shot anyway. Aren't you sorry for your wife? She's on the verge of insanity. And have pity on your son. And your aunt. She's been having heart attacks here. You might say you've already done her in. But you can still save your wife and son. Well? Who are the members? I just want you to try and guess."

Polipov saw large drops of perspiration appear on Anton's face.

"I won't try to guess, either." Anton's voice was hoarse. He swallowed audibly. "It's about time you realized it."

"You're wrong there. We'll make you talk. Kosorotov!"

At this, Kosorotov shoved Liza into the room. Anton and Polipov both rose. Polipov stood still for a few seconds and sat down again, but Anton remained standing, holding on to the edge of the desk.

Liza was terrible to look at. She was dishevelled, her clothes were tattered, and her eyes were wild when she looked around the room.

"My son! Where's my son? What have you done to him?" she wailed. She fell to her knees and crawled towards the desk.

"Liza! My darling!" Anton rushed to her and raised

her up, but Sviridov darted around the desk and wrenched her away.

"Your son is still alive and well so far." Then he turned to Anton. "Are you going to talk?"

Anton wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. "I've nothing to say. Nothing!"

"We'll make you talk!" Sviridov jerked the handle of the padded door and shouted to someone inside, "Take care of her!"

Polipov saw and absorbed all that followed through a shimmering gray haze. Three men in black rushed out of the adjacent room, grabbed hold of Liza and dragged her off. Anton lunged after them, then staggered and nearly crushed Polipov, and flattened his back against the wall. He stood there with his eyes shut tight, his fingers clawing at the wall, breaking his nails as he listened to his wife's moans coming from the next room.

Polipov looked at the wall behind Anton and saw the chipped and broken plaster and the shredded laths beneath it. That meant Anton had stood there thus, clawing at the wall, time and time again. Polipov felt nauseous and dizzy. He did not know how long he had been in a stupor. He came back to his senses from the sound of a shrill voice. It was Liza's.

"Where's my son? Did you kill him? Did you torture him to death?" She had apparently just been shoved in from the other room and was on her knees, attempting to stand up. Her bare shoulder and her palms were bloody.

"Not yet. But we will if you don't talk!"

That was Sviridov, addressing Anton again. He still stood by the wall with his eyes shut.

"Show me my son! You've killed him.... Show me my son!" Liza kept repeating. She finally managed to stand up, but recognized no one and kept turning around and around.

"All right. We'll show you your son. Kosorotov!"

Just as he had shoved Liza into the room before, Kosorotov now shoved Yura in.

"Mommy! Mommy!"

Liza threw her trembling arms around him and held him tight, spotting his dirty shirt with her blood and drag-

ging him down, too, as she sank to the floor, as she had no strength to stand. "Yura! My baby! Are you all right? Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes, Mommy." He put his hand on her face. "Why are you like this, Mommy?"

"Did they hit you? Did they hit you?"

"No, nobody hit me. But I'm hungry. I'm so hungry." Then he saw his father and Polipov. "Daddy! Uncle Petya!" He wanted to run to his father, but could not break free of his mother's strangling embrace.

"What do you mean? Daddy isn't here. He hasn't come back from Tomsk yet. I got a telegram. We're going to Moscow, to be with him. Try to sleep. Go to sleep. It's a long journey. And you won't feel hungry if you sleep. I'll sing you a song Daddy made up." She began singing in a dull, pitiful voice, recalling the words with difficulty as she pressed her child to her breast:

*The scent of wild cherry drifts over the city.
The harsh cold of winter is banished and gone.*

"Well? Are you going to talk?" Sviridov demanded as he went over to Anton. "Or you'll never see your son again." He waited a few moments, but since Savelyev still said nothing, his dry bloodless lips twitched, and he repeated once again, "I'll make you talk!" Sviridov snatched the child from his mother and shoved him back into the adjoining room. "Take care of the kid, too!"

"Mommy! Mommy!" Yura screamed from behind the closed door.

The scream exploded inside Polipov's head. As cold sweat streamed down his chest and back he rose, intending to escape.

"Sit down!" Sviridov barked.

Polipov slumped down. He stared at Liza dully. She was crawling along the floor wierdly. She was dishevelled and had a wild look as she ran her fingers over every floor board. Then she sat back and meditated for a few moments. Finally, she began snatching at the air. Her cracked lips moved. Polipov could make out the barely audible whisper.

"Yura ... my baby ... where'd you take my boy?" She

rose shakily, bumped into the desk and then into the wall, stopped to listen to something she alone could hear and smiled. Her green, fathomless eyes which Polipov had adored so burned with a feverish but still beautiful flame.

Polipov realized full well that there, beyond the padded door, something monstrous was taking place. A child was being tortured within earshot of a helpless father and crazed mother. But either because he was dazed by shock, or because everything had turned to ice inside him, he no longer felt the dizziness that had nearly left him senseless just a short while before. His only sensation was of nausea, and he was afraid he would throw up.

Anton was no longer clawing the wall. His eyes were open. His teeth were clenched so tightly it drew the skin over his jaws, making his face ugly. Polipov imagined he could hear the grinding sound and felt that Anton's teeth were crumbling.

Meanwhile, Liza was sliding along the wall towards the padded door. Suddenly, they heard a scream from within.

"Mommy! Mo...."

"That's enough! That's enough! " Sviridov tore open his collar. Then he clutched his throat and gasped, "Take them away! The whole family! " He ran over to the cupboard and snatched out the bottle.

Once again glass struck against glass.

* * *

Having swallowed his drink, Sviridov calmed down. He went back to his desk, leafed through some papers nervously, found what he was looking for and for the next ten minutes sat there writing. His pen-point jabbed holes in the lightweight paper.

"It's terrible. Terrible," Polipov mumbled as cold sweat trickled down his body. He sat hunched over and stared at the floor. "Can't you tell me why I'm here? Why'd they beat me? Why...."

"They weren't beating you, they were flogging me," Sviridov interrupted. "I was flogging myself."

"I think you're ... I think you've gone mad, not Liza."

"You're right. Just about. Well, Polipov? You just saw

it. A woman's gone crazy right here in this room, a woman you say you love.... Now, after everything that's happened, do you understand, or have you even stopped to wonder why a person's born into this world? What does he live for? What's the meaning of life? Where's the truth, the real truth? And what is falsity?" Sviridov had risen and crossed his sinewy arms on his chest. His eyes were vacant.

"That's all I need to worry about," Polipov said.

Meanwhile, another thought was pounding in his head: "He really is insane."

However, as if to refute this, Sviridov said, "That's too bad. But you will stop to wonder about it some day. Every person does sooner or later. Kosorotov! "

Polipov cringed. What would this madman do next? That was it! He was going to have Subbotin brought in for questioning.

Yet, when Kosorotov appeared, Sviridov said, gazing off into the far corner of the room, "How is she? Liza Savelyeva? "

"I guess she's just plumb crazy now, sir. She's tied up some rags into a bundle and is wandering around the cell, asking the other women why the train's late. She says she's going to Moscow to see her husband."

"Aha. What about the old woman? Ulyana Savelyeva? "

"She's stretched out, moaning and clutching her heart."

"Aha," he drawled again. "Kick them out. To hell with them. There's no sense wasting bullets on mad women. And kick the boy out, too. Here." Sviridov handed him several slips of paper. "There's a pass here for him," at this Sviridov nodded towards Polipov. "Let him go, too. You let him out yourself."

Kosorotov glanced at Polipov in surprise. However, since he had never acquired the habit of questioning the actions of his superiors all he said was, "Yes, sir."

Kosorotov left. Sviridov sank down on the chair that had so recently been occupied by Anton Savelyev and buried his face in his hands.

"Can I ... I mean, am I really free to leave?" Polipov asked softly.

"Yes."

"But how will I explain ... to my friends ... how can I explain my release?"

"I couldn't care less. Tell them whatever you want to. Although I can see it won't be easy. If you want my advice, get out of town tonight, and the farther away the better. And try to join the first Red Army unit you see. Maybe you'll be able to survive if you do. But, what's more important, you'll save the underground organizations here in Novonikolayevsk. I never did take any action on your information report. But you can be sure another man will. Then again, you can join the Whiteguard forces here in town openly if you want to. It's all up to you. If you want to, you can go to Tomsk and join Lakhnovsky. He was released from jail long ago."

"Who are you? I want to know who you are!" Polipov demanded, experiencing the same astonishment he had when he had gone to see Sviridov at home.

"Who am I?" Sviridov took his hands from his face. His drooping jowls twitched. "As of now, I'm probably nobody any more. But in the past, in the past I was a skunk just like you."

"I'd be obliged if you...."

"Let's not get emotional," Sviridov said wearily. "I once did a very cowardly thing, just as you did. Right here, in this city, in the Novonikolayevsk jail. We were there at the same time. If you remember, Anton Savelyev's father, or maybe it was his uncle, said to me then, 'You'll be a paid police informer in five years from now.' But it didn't take that long. I was a Menshevik from the start, but following the advice of our old friend Lakhnovsky, I went over to the Bolsheviks. And I started betraying them. Betraying them! In the end, I became suspect, and they didn't trust me as they had before. I wasn't as cautious and cunning as you, apparently. I'd certainly have been unmasked if not for the revolution which began just then. There were too many other things to attend to besides me in the upheaval. So I moved from Tomsk to Novonikolayevsk, and here...."

"And here you became a drunk."

"No. Here a still greater calamity awaited me. I was suddenly beset by doubts. They gave me no peace. Simple

things that had always been as clear as day to me: what was happening in the world? What had happened in my life, and where was I heading? Here was I, an educated, cultured man, an intellectual, you know, Polipov. I used to teach at school. I used to teach children to be kind and just, and humane—and who was I? What was I? Why was I living in this world? ”

“Indeed.”

“Stop it! ” Sviridov rose swiftly. “I can’t explain it all, and I don’t believe you’d understand, anyway.” He went over to the window, crossed his arms on his chest again, his hands clutching his shoulders as if he were cold. He stood there, gazing at the evening stars through the barred window. Suddenly he said, “But then you take Anton Savelyev. Does he know who he is, what he is, why he’s living in this world? His wife’s going crazy before his eyes, but he won’t talk. He can hear his son being beaten, but he won’t talk. You were here. He didn’t even name anyone, not even tentatively. Say something! How can he be like that? Where’d he get that strength of character? And in the name of what? ”

Polipov did not know what to say, nor whether any answer was expected.

“Or else.... Or else, was everything clear to him from the start? Everything that’s suddenly become so confused to me? ” Sviridov ran his long fingers back and forth across his temples. “Well, he’ll be shot. He’ll be shot first. You and I will be shot a bit later. Remember what he said? ‘The people will squash you.’” Sviridov smiled a sickly smile. “Like lice, I presume. Hm? Is that it? ”

“Why ask me? Didn’t you just prove the opposite to Anton! ”

“You’re an idiot, Polipov. What an idiot you are! ”

There even seemed to be a note of regret in his voice.

“Do you mean, that just to tell me all this and express your, I don’t know what to call them, doubts ... you put me in jail and made me watch that ... that.... Just so as I’d be beset by the same doubts? ”

“Maybe it was that. Or maybe it was something else. I don’t know any more.” Sviridov put his hand through the bars, shot back the bolt and pushed open the window. “I

just felt like arresting you. I could have shot you right here with this gun." He went over to the desk and took a gun from one of the drawers.

Polipov tried to jump up, but could not straighten out to his full height. He froze thus, doubled over and petrified. All the blood seemed to have drained out of Sviridov's face. His eyes had become vacant again. They were cold, mad eyes, and they were boring through him.

"Yes, I can, but I don't know whether it'll be just or not." He spoke softly. "I can release Anton Savelyev, too, but I don't know whether it'll be just, either. That's why the only just solution is to put a bullet through my brain."

Polipov stared at him in terror, at his vacant eyes, his paper-white cheeks, his bony fingers and knuckles that showed white as he clutched the gun. He realized in a flash that Sviridov was actually going to commit suicide.

"I have a daughter, Polipov. I think you saw her. Her name's Polina. Did you know? "

"Yes, I had a glimpse of her."

"If you survive, tell her.... Some day, if you have occasion, tell her that her father became too far involved and had no other way out. I want you to know.... If some day it turns out that I was swimming against the current, trying to return the night when it was morning, well then, it'll mean everything was right. But if ... if it turns out that I was fighting for a just cause, I want you to forgive me for not having been man enough to hold out. I tried, but I can't take it any more. When all is said and done, every man should be true to himself. But why am I telling you all this? "

"Yes, why? " Polipov wondered.

"Go away! Kosorotov'll let you out."

Polipov walked through the iron-clad doors of the security service headquarters with a pounding heart, unable to believe he was free and fearful lest someone spot him. As he hurried along the high fence that was topped by several rows of barbed wire, he heard a shot and guessed it had come from the open window of Sviridov's office. The sound was muted and not at all terrifying, quite as if a dry twig had snapped.

Following Sviridov's advice, Polipov left the city that very night, without having stopped to see anyone or speak to anyone.

* * *

On the first night of July, a dark and sultry night, Anton Savelyev was led off to be executed. It was about three a.m., but the summer nights were short, and the heavy clouds that covered the sky were turning blue in the east. There was a sound of distant thunder in the air.

An elderly guard sporting a stringy moustache walked along to the right of Anton, shouting angrily from time to time, "Come on, come on, keep moving! We're late as it is. It'll soon be light. Ah, you son-of-a-bitch!" And he'd jab him with his rifle stock.

But a quarter of an hour before the guard had whispered as he had put a pair of handcuffs on Anton in the prison yard, "They've been sawed through. We'll take you past the ravine. The minute I start coughing, jump. They'll be waiting for you down there."

Anton's heart began to pound. Would he actually manage to escape death once again?

They soon left the city and entered a birch copse. Anton knew it was a small copse and led into the real forest. That was where the ravine had its source. It was not a very deep ravine, and the bottom was covered with bushes. "I wonder if I'll make it? Who'll be waiting for me? Subbotin, probably. Who else?"

Anton was more tense than he had ever been. More tense even than during the most desperate and hopeless situations he had been in during his many previous prison escapes.

They had been walking along the edge of the ravine for quite some time. Anton waited expectantly for his guard to cough, but the only sound now was that of the first, sleepy robin call.

Although he had been expecting the signal, it took him unawares. The guard suddenly turned his head aside and coughed. Anton knocked him off balance by ramming his shoulder into him, reached the edge of the ravine in a few

bounds, jumped and rolled down the slippery, grassy slope. He felt that his hands were free. Two bits of curved iron which had now lost their sinister meaning dangled from his wrists. Shots were fired overhead and were accompanied by the shouting of the other guards. Although the shooting was coming from above and was haphazard, since the bottom of the ravine was as dark as pitch, Anton could hear the thud of bullets landing in the damp earth all around him.

"Hurry! Over here! " someone said in an undertone. Anton recognized the voice. It belonged to Kornei Baulin, a type-setter at the local printshop. Kornei pulled him down into a crevice and lay down beside him, breathing heavily. They could hear the pounding feet very close at hand now. Then the guard with the stringy moustache shouted:

"He went that way! The son-of-a-bitch! Down the ravine over there. There he is! Stop, you! " Shots were fired in quick succession again as the sound of galloping feet and branches cracking under the soldiers' boots died away.

"Hurry! " Baulin rose and led him off at a run in the opposite direction.

Anton had hit his knee in falling. Luckily, it was not too bad. He ran after Kornei, limping slightly.

They climbed up the ravine slope about fifty yards away. Zasukhin's cab was waiting for them behind some bushes.

"Get in," Zasukhin said, gathering up the reins. "Here, change into this. And file off the bracelets." He tossed Anton a small file and a bundle of clothes and sped them off along a grassy forest road. Kornei Baulin darted into the woods and was gone. Dawn was breaking. The robin's singing filled the air. The cab rolled along softly, soundlessly.

It was daylight by the time they reached the bank of a small river that flowed near the city. They drove into the rose willows that grew along the bank and stopped. A lanky young man of about twenty-five ran up to greet them.

"This is Danilo Koshkin. He's Ivan the guard's son," Zasukhin said introducing him to Anton. "He'll take you

across in his boat. There ... anyway, he knows where to take you. You keep away from town for a while. That's Subbotin's orders. He sends his regards. Well, you better start out before the sun's too high."

"There's something I've got to ask you, Vasily Stepanovich. How are Liza and Yura, and my aunt? The investigator, Sviridov, committed suicide, but he let them out before he did."

"Your aunt died," Zasukhin said. "Her heart gave out. But thank goodness your wife's all right. She's feeling better now. And your boy's all right, too. Don't worry. They're being taken care of by our people. We heard about Sviridov. And we know your uncle Mitrofan was shot. But what happened to Pyotr Polipov? They say Sviridov nabbed him, too."

"I saw him there once. Only once, when I was being questioned. They must have shot him."

"Maybe." Zasukhin frowned. "There were some nights when they shot a hundred people at a time."

As Danilo Koshkin rowed them silently across, Anton breathed in deeply and greedily. He kept glancing up and down the deserted river.

"When you see your father, thank him for me," Anton said when they finally nosed into the bank.

The youth smiled scornfully. "What he deserves is a bullet."

"What do you mean? "

"Just that. You think he agreed to help us for nothing? Like hell he did! He got a good bribe for it. He's crazy about money. I thought he'd trick us anyway, but he didn't. He did everything according to our plan."

"Oh! "

"What'd you think? I parted ways with that leech long ago." He was silent for a moment and then added, "On ideological grounds."

Colonel Zubov ordered Silanty Savelyev and his wife Ustinya to be hanged publicly on the main street of Mikhailovka Village.

On a Sunday afternoon, July 13, 1919, all the women, old men and children of Mikhailovka were herded to the great poplar that grew in the center of the village. Two waxed nooses were suspended from a mighty bough. A rough bench had been leaned against the tree trunk. The air was rent by shouting, noise and the wailing of children. However, the cutthroats of Mikhail Lukich Kaftanov's gang forced everyone out of their houses and drove them to the place of execution. Kaftanov was the former shopkeeper of Mikhailovka and the richest man in the vicinity. He and his gang had shown up in the village at the same time the Whiteguards had.

The mighty granite cliffs of Zvenigora, etched against the vast, pale sky, glittered blindingly in the sun. The mountain was located about five miles from Mikhailovka. A small, snow-white cloud seemed to have caught on one of the crags and remained thus, bobbing lightly for a while, as though observing all that was taking place in the village. Then, leaving wisps of itself on the jagged rocks, it drifted off towards the large village of Shantara, situated on the bank of the broad and turbulent Gromotukha River beyond Zvenigora.

Old Silanty was hanged for having helped a partisan detachment escape to the inaccessible rocky folds of Zvenigora. It was a large detachment, organized a year before by Polikarp Kruzhilin, the former chairman of the Shantara volost executive committee. The detachment had pursued Kaftanov's gang of kulaks which had been formed during the Whiteguard Czech coup.

The partisan detachment was actually in control of a huge area of dense forest land in the taiga, along the upper reaches of the Gromotukha. The detachment interfered with the collection of land taxes, debts of long standing, and the conscription of young men into the Whiteguard Kolchak army.

That spring, hiding out in the forests along the river, small groups of partisans would suddenly appear along deserted stretches of the railroad to the south of Shantara. They wrecked the tracks, took apart and carried off the rails and blew up the small bridges with home-made mines. Railroad communication between Novonikolayevsk and

Barnaul was all but disrupted in March, April and May. That was when regular troops of the Whiteguard cavalry and infantry regiment under Colonel Zubov were dispatched from Novonikolayevsk with orders to wipe out Kruzhilin's detachment at all cost.

Zubov's regiment arrived at Shantara Station early in June and passed through Mikhailovka and into the taiga, where Kaftanov and his gang of over a hundred bandits joined it. Towards the end of the month Zubov and Kaftanov were able to force the badly depleted partisan detachment out of the taiga and into the bare steppe outside Mikhailovka. Although there were still about three hundred men in the detachment, they were practically out of ammunition. Having put several hours between themselves and their pursuers, and after wading across the Gromotukha, which was shallow in the summer, Kruzhilin wanted to take his men through the village and to the east, towards Ognev Springs. Zubov and Kaftanov were hot on their heels, advancing from the south and north. Looming up before them in the west was Zvenigora. And beyond the pass was Shantara where, according to Yakov Aleinikov, the mercurial chief of the partisan scouts, there was a small but well-armed Whiteguard garrison. That left the east, the road to the Springs, but Kruzhilin was not at all certain that Zubov had not sent a detachment of his troops around to block off all means of escape and thus close the circle.

"We've got to check the road to the Springs, Yakov," Kruzhilin said as he dismounted by the well in the middle of the village. He raised a pail of water to his lips and began drinking thirstily.

"Right," Aleinikov replied. He was a short, slim thin-lipped youth. He stopped a red-bearded, middle-aged partisan and shouted, "Send Fyodor Savelyev and the boys over quick!" Then he took the pail from Kruzhilin and also drank greedily.

The frightened and curious villagers surrounded the two men.

A few moments later about two dozen horsemen rode up to the well in a cloud of dust. There were startled cries in the crowd.

"Look! It's Fyodor, Silanty's boy! "

"Goodness! And who's that with him? The one in the leather jacket? Over there on the bay. It looks like a girl, even though she's wearing pants. Isn't that Anna Kaftanova? "

"Never. How'd Kaftanov's daughter turn up in the partisan detachment? "

"But it is her! Just look! It is her! "

"Kirian! Iniutin? " an old woman shouted. "Are you a partisan, too? "

"Which Kirian? You mean the elder's son? "

"Yes! It's him! "

"God Almighty! Everything's topsy-turvy. Akim said our peg-legged elder's went and joined Kaftanov, and that he's his paymaster now."

"Who are these partisans? "

"And Akim said Silanty's younger boy, Ivan, joined Kaftanov's gang, too."

"That's what I mean. You can't make head or tail of it."

Meanwhile, Yakov Aleinikov had mounted his horse, waved his arm and led his squadron out of the village at a gallop. They returned an hour later, having lost two men.

"We rode right into machine-gun fire near the swamp," Yakov reported. "They didn't even bother to pursue us. The rats know we've no way out now."

This was what Kruzhilin had feared. The swamp covered a vast area, and now the only road across it had been cut off. His detachment was in a trap.

Kruzhilin heard Aleinikov's report as he sat on a bench in Silanty Savelyev's small cottage. He lowered his head and stared at the floor as he dragged on his cigarette.

Fyodor Savelyev was twenty-four years old. He was broad-shouldered and well built. His eyebrows were joined on the bridge of his nose, and his dark, rather sullen eyes smouldered. He dismounted lightly in the yard, threw the reins of his lathered horse to Anna, as he always did, ran his hand over his small, dusty moustache and entered the cottage. His sword clanged as he walked. Several partisans were sitting at the hewn table, eating. Ustinya, looking old, and as dark and withered as an old leaf, swayed towards him.

"Fedya, my boy." She began to weep. "How's Ivan? Where is he? Do you know whether he's alive or not?"

"Uh ... I guess he's alive if he hasn't crossed my path yet," Fyodor muttered. "But if he does, that'll sure be the end of him." He freed himself of her embrace carefully.

Silanty, whose hair was now snow-white, sat on a low bench by the door. He looked up at his son but said nothing.

Pankrat Nazarov, the former chairman of the Mikhailovka Village Soviet and now Kruzhilin's deputy, entered. Nazarov was over forty. He was graying visibly and had a peasant's awkwardness and lumbering movements. He had been badly wounded six months before, and the bullet had lodged in his chest. Nazarov had spat blood for about two weeks after and no one expected him to survive. However, he was a hardy man and the bleeding eventually stopped. He was soon back on his feet again.

"You must have spat the bullet out and never noticed it," his friends said.

"Oh, no. I can feel that damned bitch inside of me. It must be in my lungs. Whenever I'm out of breath I can feel it. What the hell, at least I weigh more now."

Nazarov was an even-tempered, thoughtful, just man. That was why his fellow-villagers had elected and re-elected him their elder. He was respected by all in the partisan detachment. His holster and Mauser gun weighed heavily on his belt and seemed out of place and unnecessary, adding nothing to his appearance. Looking at Nazarov, one would never think he knew how to handle a gun.

"We fed the men. I counted the cartridges. There's next to nothing left. What do we do now, lie down and die?"

Kruzhilin raised his head. His keen eyes took in Nazarov and Fyodor, and came to rest on Silanty. "If we do, it'll be at a high price. We won't even hold out for half an hour if we fight it out in the open. Lead the men to Zvenigora. We'll hide out in the gorges there. Go on."

Nazarov left. The men finished their food quickly and hurried after him. The sound of horses whinnying, wagons with the wounded creaking, men shouting and orders being

issued reached them through the weatherbeaten old walls of the cottage.

"Well, Silanty Ivanovich," Kruzhilin said with a sigh. This was obviously not the first time he had broached the subject. "Maybe you'll show us the way to Green Dell after all? There's nobody else who can, except you. I asked the couple of other old men, but they've refused. They're afraid to."

Silanty smoothed the sparse hair on his peaked dome and still said nothing. Ustinya wiped the tears from her flabby cheeks and sobbed,

"The Whiteguards'll shoot anybody who does. As soon as they get here, that'll be the end of him."

"Well, then, they'll kill all of us, and your son Fyodor among the first," Kruzhilin replied harshly.

"Hush, woman," Silanty finally said softly. "I'm not worried about being shot. Thank God, I've had a long life. I just don't know whether I'll find the way. I don't think I've been to the Dell in neigh on fifty years. Well, maybe the Good Lord will help me find the way. Come on." He rose. "We've got to take along about five long logs and about a dozen planks. And nails."

Green Dell was tucked away among the crags of Zvenigora. It was like a mountain pasture covered with dense, virgin grass and surrounded by sheer cliffs. Cold springs gushed forth from the foot of many of them. There was but a single mountain path leading to the Dell, which snaked along the edge of the granite precipices. You could only manage in single file and, if sorely pressed, lead the horses by the reins.

The old men of the village were afraid the children would be tempted to find the Dell and would perish on the way. Thus, the whereabouts of the only path was kept a secret. Kruzhilin, who had been born and raised in Mikhailovka, had tried to find the beginning of the secret path many a time as a boy, but had failed.

Kruzhilin's plan was simple. He knew that the Whiteguards would soon pick them off in the unprotected gorges. However, if they managed to reach the unassailable Green Dell they would be able to defend the narrow path with their remaining ammunition for a long time. How-

ever, Kruzhilin could not know what would follow and tried not to think about it.

The sun was still high when he, Aleinikov, and Fyodor and Silanty Savelyevs climbed out of the gig at the foot of Zvenigora. Silanty leaned on his crutch, looked about and then began the climb, breathing heavily and grunting from the effort from time to time.

"Aha! Here it is, I think. Follow this ridge, and take the logs and planks along. The ridge'll end about forty yards from here, right at the edge of a chasm. It's deep as the devil but it's not wide, not more'n two yards across. The path begins on the other side. Throw the logs across, nail the planks on crosswise, and you'll be able to cross over easily. And your horses, too. Then follow the path to the dell if it hasn't disappeared in all these years. Well, I'll go back now. I'm no good at this kind of climbing any more." He seemed then to take notice of his son for the very first time. Silanty embraced him, saying, "Well, goodbye, Fyodor. May the Lord preserve you."

"You sure you don't want to come with us, Silanty Ivanovich?" Kruzhilin said.

"No, I'm too old. But you'd better hurry." He went back down to the gig, climbed up and drove to the village, past partisans on foot and in wagons, on their way to Zvenigora.

Towards evening of that day the remnants of Kruzhilin's detachment disappeared in the mountains, having abandoned the now-useless wagons, carrying their wounded, and lead their balking, snorting horses.

How enraged Colonel Zubov was, that tall, slim man with the sleek, closely-shaven cheeks, when he realized that Kruzhilin had outwitted him. One of the villagers came forth on his own and told the colonel about Silanty. Zubov, who was terrible in his rage, galloped into Mikhailovka late that evening. He was accompanied by his twelve-year-old son Petya, who went everywhere with him as an aide-de-camp of sorts. Zubov tossed him the reins and stormed into Silanty's cottage.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" His crop came down twice on the old man. Zubov's firm cheeks shook like jelly. "Arrest

him! Flog him to death! And I want the whole village out there to see it! ”

“Have mercy on him, sir! ” Ustinya cried, falling to her knees. “They made him do it! How could he’ve said he wouldn’t? Have mercy! My son Ivan’s in your regiment. Please, sir! ”

“Shut up! ” the purple-faced Zubov shouted. “What son? Who are you? Arrest her, too! ”

Silanty and Ustinya were not flogged. Instead, they were kept under guard for over a week in Kaftanov’s stout smokehouse. Then Zubov ordered them both to be hanged.

* * *

Ivan Savelyev, Silanty’s younger son, was blond, as lean as a greyhound, and had very long arms. As a reward for faithful service Mikhail Lukich Kaftanov made him his bodyguard, groom and driver. Ivan carried out his orders diligently and uncomplainingly, for Kaftanov had promised, and this had been before the Revolution, that he would consent to Ivan’s marrying his only daughter, Anna.

In the spring of 1918, when the bloody merry-go-round had begun to turn, Anna had disappeared from the village. She was known to be with Fyodor in Kruzhilin’s partisan detachment.

“That bitch! ” her wall-eyed brother Zinovy said when he was told of this, and his good eye glittered meanly. “She was just like a bitch in heat, running after your brother Fyodor the way she did. And now....”

Ivan knew that Anna had always been after his brother. Kaftanov had whipped her several times and had dragged her around by the hair, trying to make her stop. But it hadn’t helped. In those days Kaftanov had promised his farmhand Ivan his daughter in marriage, but Ivan knew that Kaftanov was hesitant and so kept putting it off. Then, when Anna was said to be in the partisan detachment, Mikhail Lukich’s very beard seemed to bristle, and the red veins in his eyes seemed actually

to bulge. That was when he had said in a deathly calm voice:

"You do your duty here, Ivan. We'll get Anna back and I'll throw her to your feet. You can kick her to death if you want to or pardon her. It'll be up to you. You have my word."

A year had gone by since then, but Kaftanov had still been unable to get his daughter back. And even if he did, Ivan thought unhappily, even if Kaftanov threw her to his feet, what good it would do?

A captured partisan from Kruzhilin's detachment whom Ivan was leading off to be shot on Kaftanov's orders told him that Anna was serving like a man in Fyodor's squadron, taking part in all the scimmages and always riding beside Fyodor, even in the heat of battle, to shield him from bullets or swords.

"But I don't think they're sleeping together. You can't say that about them. That's what everybody says is so unnatural about the whole thing," the partisan said. "But I don't think it is. Anna's the kind of girl that's hard to find nowadays. She won't let a fellow as much as touch her before they're properly married."

Ivan disobeyed orders and let the partisan go instead of shooting him, risking his neck to do so, for if Kaftanov had found out he would have had Ivan shot. The partisan, a short, bow-legged peasant from Kazanikha Village, beamed and said.

"What say you join us? Hm? How about joining Kruzhilin's unit?"

"No. I couldn't do that. I'm all mixed up, like a bird in a snare. My brother Fyodor'll make it his business to cut my head off personally."

"He wouldn't dare! Polikarp Kruzhilin gives all the orders there. He's a good fine man."

"Go on! Get going before I change my mind! "

From that day onward Ivan began to waste away. He couldn't sleep nights, and as he tossed about he kept wondering why he had become so mixed up and who was to blame. Was it because of his love for Anna? Was he to blame? Or was she who had turned away from him? Or was Kaftanov who had promised him his daughter? Or the

times, the bloody confusion that had mixed everything up? Or all of these together?

He did not know the answer.

* * *

When Ivan learned that Zubov had ordered his parents to be hanged he felt the ground giving way under him. "Mikhail Lukich?"

"What the hell can I do about it?" Kaftanov stormed. "Why'd the old devil have to show them the path to the dell? How're we ever going to smoke the partisans out of there?"

Indeed, they were now out of reach. The narrow, rocky ridge was guarded day and night. The guards would lie on a tiny flat space protected by a shield of rocks they had set up. The moment a Whiteguard appeared in the distance, one of the partisans would take careful aim and fire. The man would be flung away from the cliff and would sail down into the gorge flapping his arms. That was all there was to it.

"Then I'll go! I'll go to the colonel myself and ask him to pardon them."

"You do that," Kaftanov said and chuckled harshly. "Ever hear of Mikhail Kosorotov? The colonel will hand you right over to him."

The members of Kaftanov's gang told terrible tales about a man named Kosorotov. No one had actually seen him, but it was a known fact that there was a civilian among Zubov's scouts, an expert executioner who could make any prisoner talk. And they went on to describe the details, whether true or invented, which made the listeners' blood run cold.

Now that the partisans had been forced into Green Dell, and seeing that there was no way of getting at them, Colonel Zubov decided to starve them out. He left a battalion of soldiers at the foot of Zvenigora and sent all the others to rest up in Mikhailovka Village. Meanwhile, taking a platoon of soldiers and a cavalry squadron as an escort, he set out for Kaftanov's forest retreat at Ognev Springs.

The farmstead in the woods, located about twenty miles from Mikhailovka, was on the bank of a deep, clear lake and consisted of a large house, a bathhouse, four barns and a stable. There was no habitation for miles around, and Kaftanov had used the retreat for his wild orgies. It was quiet here now. The bridles of the saddled horses in the stable jingled. The colonel's aide-de-camp hurried back and forth across the grassy yard soundlessly. The colonel, looking as black as a cloud and hardly ever speaking, had spent the past few days fishing in a rowboat with his son.

Kaftanov did not want his men's drunken brawling to disturb the colonel's rest and so quartered them in Mikhailovka, taking only his son Zinovy and Ivan along to the retreat.

On the morning of July 13th, and despite Kaftanov's dire warning, Ivan approached the door of the largest room with a sinking sensation in his stomach and took a deep breath. He knocked twice. Hearing a response, he entered.

Zubov and his son were having breakfast. The colonel had seen Ivan around and now looked at him in surprise, unable to understand why he was there. When he finally did, his face became livid.

"So that's it? So that's ... he's your father? "

"Sir! He's old! He's gone out of his mind."

"Get out! " the colonel bellowed. He yanked the white linen napkin from his collar and balled it up.

Ivan flew out of the house, sank down on a bench outside and clutched his flaming head. An hour later he was still sitting there.

Zubov came out of the house carrying his rods. "Savelyev! "

Ivan rose.

"I know you're a good soldier. Your father will be ... will be punished. But I'll pardon your mother. She's not to blame. I've dispatched a man with my orders."

The colonel headed towards the lake. Ivan stood frozen to the spot, and it seemed as though he would stand there forever.

* * *

The villagers who had been herded to the poplar were milling around anxiously. A murmur rose over the crowd. Women were weeping. Suddenly, all became still as fear gripped their hearts. Silanty and Ustinya were being led towards the tree.

The old man's step was firm. He was staring straight ahead and his lips were compressed in a bitter line. Ustinya trudged along a step behind, looking about as if she did not understand why such a large crowd had gathered. When she saw the nooses swaying on the bough she cried out and sank down into the dust. Two Whiteguards took her arms and dragged her towards the tree.

Yakov Aleinikov was in the crowd. He had on a tattered jacket and was stroking his false beard with a shaking hand as he glared sullenly at the Whiteguard soldiers who were setting the bench up under the nooses.

Yakov had spent three days and three nights climbing up and down the cliffs around Green Dell, bruising his hands and legs as he searched for place from which they could descend. At last he found one that was more or less acceptable. He had tied several reins end to end and, under cover of the night, had lowered himself from a ridge down the face of the sheer, fifty-yard cliff. That morning he had reached Petrovan Golovlyev's cottage in Mikhailovka. Petrovan had helped the partisan scouts on several occasions before.

When the Whiteguard soldiers began herding the villagers towards the poplar, Golovlyev had wanted to hide Yakov in his cellar, but the reckless Yakov had said,

"I'll go with you. It'll help me hate them more."

"What if they recognize you?"

"I won't squeal on you. Don't worry."

The crowd suddenly parted, making way for a rider. Colonel Zubov's aide dismounted. He spoke to one of the soldiers. The soldier went over where Ustinya sat under the tree, prodded her to her feet and shoved her into the crowd.

"Did they pardon her?" a woman with a child in her arms who stood beside Aleinikov murmured.

"I guess so," someone replied. "Maybe they pardoned

Silanty, too."

However, at that very moment the same soldier was making Silanty climb on the bench. Then he climbed up beside him, slipped the noose over the old man's scrawny neck and jumped down.

"Say a last word to the people," the soldier spoke softly.

"What? Oh." Silanty lowered his head in thought. Then he raised it and said, "Well, then ... tell my boy Ivan how his pa died."

The crowd hung on his every word. Then a loud murmur rose up again. It seemed to frighten the soldier, who kicked the bench out from under the old man.

"Silanty! " Ustinya screamed. "Silanty! " Her cries were drowned in the great moan that rose up.

* * *

At dawn several days later Yakov Aleinikov returned to Green Dell. Fyodor Savelyev and Danilo Koshkin, the son of the Novonikolayevsk prison guard who had parted ways with his father "on ideological grounds", were on duty at the ridge and pulled him up.

"There's all kinds of Yakovs, but this one only comes one of a kind," he said, feeling pleased with himself. Then he frowned and said, "They've hanged your father, Fyodor."

"What! " Fyodor sank down on the cold granite.

That same morning Yakov announced his bold and daring plan. "There's only a lousy half-squadron of cavalry guarding the exit down there. There used to be an infantry battalion, but then they saw they couldn't get at us. And that we couldn't get out, either. So they pulled up our bridge across the gorge, and most of them are stationed in Mikhailovka now. There's only twelve men down there now. I counted them. They stand watch two at a time, with the other ten sleeping. They put their horses out to graze on the meadow. The regiment and Kaftanov's gang are all quartered in Mikhailovka. Zubov and Kaftanov are at the retreat at Ognev Springs, taking steam baths and fishing. I forgot to say, there's about a squadron of cavalry

at the retreat and an infantry platoon. There's also a machine-gun set up by the road across Zhuravlinye Swamps. It's manned day and night. But that's nothing. My scouts and I can take care of it without firing a shot.

"So this is what I suggest. Say, about two dozen men go down the cliff on ropes at night. It won't be hard to take care of twelve soldiers down there, what with most of them being asleep anyway. Then we'll lead our men down and out to the retreat. We should reach it by dawn. We have to reach it by dawn. We'll cut out Zubov's sleeping guards in no time and retreat into the taiga. They'll never find us there."

Five men were sitting on the trampled grass outside Kruzhilin's tent. They were: Yakov Aleinikov, Kruzhilin, his deputy Pankrat Nazarov, Kornei Baulin, the former type-setter, and Vasily Zasukhin, the former cabbie. Following Subbotin's advice, Baulin, Zasukhin and Danilo Koshkin had left Novonikolayevsk to escape the White-guard secret service after organizing Anton Savelyev's prison break. A year before they had joined Kruzhilin's detachment in the woods near Gromotukha. Now Baulin, a taciturn man with lead-stained fingers, was their unofficial chief of staff. Zasukhin was their quartermaster. Koshkin served in Fyodor's squadron.

The sun was rising in the distance, touching the granite peaks with gold. It was as cold as in a deep well at the bottom of the dell which was dotted with tents. Steam rose from the men's mouths. There was no dew, but the fog rising from the bottom of the dell licked the sheer cliffs. Horses grazed among the tents. The partisans were awakening, and here and there campfires made of damp branches were lit.

Yakov Aleinikov was putting forth his plan in a cheerful, confident voice, quite as if there was nothing to it. But his comrades realized that though it all sounded simple enough, it might not turn out as planned at all. Each man was silent, thinking it over to himself.

"Well," Kornei Baulin, who always thought twice before he spoke, drawled at last. "The way you tell it, Yakov, it seems like child's play. And we'd probably be able to do it that way if we had the wherewith. What if

one of those soldiers down there jumps on his horse and makes it to Mikhailovka? He'll raise up the regiment just as we're crawling out of our rocky hole. They'll make mincemeat out of us."

"Sure, it's a risk," Yakov agreed and shrugged as if he was surprised at Baulin for not being able to understand it.

"Or what if we don't wipe out all the men on the road to the springs?" Nazarov said. "They'll warn the squadron at the retreat. Then we'll have it down on us, with the infantry platoon right behind, and they'll cut off the road across the swamp. By that time the whole regiment'll come up from behind. See? It won't be mincemeat, it'll be mashed potatoes. Or maybe we'll just be sucked down into the quag."

"Any battle is a risk," Aleinikov retorted. "All right, say the squadron and the platoon both come down on us from the retreat. We'll crush them both. I know we will! After all, they won't have any place to manoeuvre in on that narrow road, either. We still have a couple of dozen grenades. We'll use them to break through, though we may have heavy losses if things turn out like that. The main thing is to make sure we don't let anybody escape from that half-squadron stationed down below here, so they can't warn the regiment. But even if someone does, so what? We can retreat again. We have to risk it!"

Yes, they had to risk it, and everyone understood this. The wounded were dying for lack of treatment. They had already buried nine men. The meager supplies which they had got in Mikhailovka were running out. Kruzhilin had ordered two of their horses to be slaughtered for meat the previous day. They could hold out for another two weeks, or perhaps even a month, on their dwindling supplies of flour and horsemeat, but then what? Death from starvation awaited them.

They spent the next hour discussing the plan from all angles. Zasukhin suggested another plan. He said that they should lower themselves from the cliff in small groups over the course of several nights and disperse in the outlying woods and villages, and then gather at a pre-arranged spot. This plan was discussed and rejected, for if but one of their men fell into Zubov's hands and broke under torture (and

there were all kinds of men in the detachment), it would doom them all, for the assembly point would then be known to the enemy. Besides, there were still many wounded, and what was to be done about them?

An hour later Aleinikov's plan was discussed at a general meeting and adopted.

* * *

Towards evening the sky above the dell became overcast. This was a favorable sign. Before darkness fell twenty men, guided by Aleinikov, were lowered down the face of the cliff on knotted ropes and reins. Yakov was the last one down. During the next hour he led his men along the bottom of the gorge and then through dense thickets until they reached the foot of Zvenigora.

The Whiteguard half-squadron that guarded the entrance to Green Dell was wiped out soundlessly after the partisans came upon the sleeping enemy. However, the two soldiers standing guard each managed to fire a shot before Aleinikov slashed one with his sabre and shot the second as he was trying to escape. These three shots echoed through the mountains.

Meanwhile, Polikarp Kruzhilin was leading the rest of the detachment along the narrow ridge and out of the dell. By the light of the campfire which the Whiteguard sentries had made the partisans hastily laid the dismantled log-and-plank bridge across the chasm, while four of the men ran off to catch the hobbled horses.

"Not bad at all! There they are, all twelve of them," Yakov, who was still flushed from the battle, said to Kruzhilin after he had run across the first log to be put down. "You hurry and back me up, and I'll take care of the machine-gun nest on the road meanwhile. There's only five of them there."

"Be careful, Yakov." Kruzhilin sounded worried.

"We'll be all right. I know how to get them on unawares. You bring the men after us and don't worry."

Yakov led ten riders off into the night.

So far all was still. The horses snorted. Their hooves

clattered on the makeshift bridge over the chasm as the men bustled around them. The Whiteguards had driven off some of the wagons the partisans had abandoned at the foot of the cliff and had chopped the rest up for firewood. The partisans were now hunting for the remaining wagons and gigs and harnessing the horses to them. They loaded the wounded onto the wagons and set off into the darkness. The column of men and horses stretched out for nearly half a kilometer along the road.

Kruzhilin was uneasy. Would their bold plan work? After all, they were unarmed and helpless. If but a single Whiteguard out in the steppe that night came upon them and galloped off to Mikhailovka to sound an alarm.... Aleinikov's plan had not taken such a possibility into consideration.

Nervous tremors ran down Kruzhilin's icy body.

The detachment had been advancing along flat steppe-land for over an hour when they reached the first of the small copses. Kruzhilin breathed more easily now, for the woods, no matter how sparse, offered some protection. They would soon reach the swamp but there was still no word from Yakov. Had his venture succeeded? Had he wiped out the ambushed machine-gun?

Aleinikov appeared from the dark unexpectedly and soundlessly, quite as if his horse had wings and had flown back. "That takes care of that!" he exclaimed, and Kruzhilin heaved a sigh of relief. "Those sleeping beauties! We're soaked, because we had to swim up to them. Is there anything we can change into?"

"What about the machine-gun?"

"I said everything was all right. And we brought back a boxes of cartridge belts. There's more than a dozen of them!"

This meant salvation, to all intents and purposes. Now, even if the entire whiteguard regiment came down on them they could hold it off on the narrow road long enough to give the detachment a chance to destroy Colonel Zubov's cavalry squadron and infantry platoon stationed at the forest retreat. Then they could disappear into the dense woods that began just beyond the swamp.

* * *

"Dad's been hanged. Dad's been hanged! " The words kept pounding at Fyodor's brain all through the previous day. He had gone into his tent and lay there without moving a muscle until evening. Anna had brought him a bowl of thin flour gruel in the morning, then at noon, and once again towards evening. But he had pushed it away each time and muttered, "Leave me alone."

As they had made their way along the stony ridge and out of the dell, Fyodor had missed his step and had nearly gone plummeting into the chasm, pulling his horse down after him. Anna, who was right in back of him, screamed, but Fyodor said calmly,

"Be quiet. I don't intend to die yet."

He was thinking, "There's something I've got to attend to before I die. I've got to reach the retreat! May be Ivan's there. If Kaftanov's there, it means Ivan's there with him. Wait till I get my hands on you, you rat! " This desire for vengeance gave him no peace.

It was nearly dawn when they approached the retreat. If the day had been a clear one, the sky in the east would have been blue, but what with the heavy clouds overhead, it was black and oppressing. However, Fyodor could not have cared whether it was pitch dark or the bright of day. There was the retreat. Through the trees they could see the glimmer of a night lamp in one of the windows. The partisans had unsheathed their sabres, as had Fyodor. He had also opened his holster. Yakov Aleinikov was talking about some barns where the Whiteguards were sleeping and about somebody named Colonel Zubov, whom they were to get at any cost. Anna, who rode beside him as always on her bay mare, was saying softly, as always, "Take care, Fyodor. I beg you. Be careful." But why should he be careful? And what the hell did he care about somebody named Colonel Zubov? All he cared about was meeting up with his brother Ivan. Where was Kruzhilin? Where was Pankrat Nazarov? Why weren't they sounding the order to attack?

However, he did not get to see Kruzhilin or Nazarov or to hear them issue a command. The stillness was suddenly shattered by the clatter of a machine-gun. It was followed

by the roar of a grenade exploding. The night lamp in Kaftanov's house flickered and was turned up.

"Attack!" Yakov screamed. Fyodor spurred his horse and shouted,

"Follow me, men!"

Then everything became a roaring, whistling, fiery mass. An outbuilding was flaming like a torch. Fyodor pranced about in the lighted yard, cutting down the staggering, sleepy, half-dressed Whiteguards who seemed to be throwing themselves against his sabre. The familiar faces of Danilo Koshkin, Kyrian Iniutin and the other men of his squadron, distorted in the rage of battle, flashed back and forth. Anna rode beside him, gun in hand. In every battle, no matter how furious it was, she rode beside him with her gun at the ready and had saved him from certain death at least twice before.

Suddenly Fyodor sensed that she was no longer there. He pulled up his lathered horse and looked around. Fifty feet away Anna's wounded horse was thrashing about on the ground, as she tried frantically to free her foot from the stirrup. Danilo Koshkin had dismounted and had come to her aid. At the same time a Whiteguard, shooting from his knee, was firing one shot after another at them from around the corner of the flaming stable.

"He'll kill her! He'll kill them!" Fyodor pulled his gun from his holster. However, before he had a chance to fire Aleinikov burst on the scene from behind the stable, engulfed in fire and smoke. His sabre gleamed in the blaze like a flash of lightning. The Whiteguard dropped his gun. His head nodded and touched the ground. Then he stretched out slowly, as if he were going to sleep.

Yakov shouted wildly, "Watch the windows, Fyodor! Zubov and Kaftanov are inside! Don't let them escape!" He dismounted quickly, flew up the porch steps and crashed his shoulder into the locked door.

Fyodor reared in his horse and then galloped around the house. The windows were dark. All except one. A bench was set on the ground under it. The window shone brightly. He could see shadows darting back and forth behind the white curtain. For a moment he thought one of them resembled Ivan's. It was a fleeting impression, but

this was sufficient. Casting aside all thought of danger, he leaped from his saddle onto the bench, broke the window with his shoulder and ripped off and cast away the flimsy curtain.

As Fyodor stood on the window sill amidst the shattered glass he shouted in triumph. There before him, with his back against the wall and holding a gun, was Kaftanov. A tall, slim man with an officer's tunic bearing a colonel's insignia thrown hastily over his shoulders stood in a corner brandishing a sabre. A terrified boy of about ten or twelve was pressed against him. The boy was dressed in an officer's uniform cut to his size but lacking shoulder straps. His brother Ivan stood by the door!

Ivan was also armed, but he had lowered the hand that held a gun and was staring in astonishment at his brother. His large, round eyes blinked uncomprehendingly.

* * *

Most of September 1919 was windy and rainy in the upper reaches of the Gromotukha. The leaves had turned a premature yellow and then the wind had whipped them off the trees. When the sky cleared the cold sun came out, shining through the bare branches and trying to dry the wet earth.

The birds were flying south. From sunup till sundown the sky was streaked with whistling black strings of flying ducks, with soundless flocks of geese that had grown fat over the summer and now flapped lazily overhead, and by the V's of heavy, flying cranes that filled the taiga with their shrill, plaintive cries.

Ivan was seated on a chest in a stuffy little cubbyhole, staring at the floor and listening to the birds' cries that came to him through the double window frames. He was silent. Anna, too, was silent. She was curled up on the bed with her feet tucked under her like a little animal. A sentry walked back and forth outside the window. Sometimes he sat down on the bench there to smoke and spat tobacco juice on the ground.

There was hardly a sign of life in Anna's pale, sickly

face. Her gray eyes had turned into two spots of cold, gray ash where only the black pupils still flamed, burning Ivan painfully.

"Don't look at me like that, Anna," he pleaded and his head sank still lower.

"How should I look at you?" When she spoke her parched lips moved disdainfully.

Ivan tossed his head back and forth and moaned, "You've wrecked my life, damn you! You've crushed it with your boot like a tomato."

"If you go on like this you'll soon be raving."

"Let's get married, Anna! I'll take care of you like a baby for the rest of your life."

"Oh, no. I'd rather be hanged like your father was."

"Anna! "

"Go on, beg me to love you. Who knows, I might take pity on you," she mocked.

This was not the first time they had gone over the same ground. Ivan went outside and sat down by the wall in the cold sun. The cries of the departing cranes were clearer, louder and somehow more mournful here.

The village of Zyatkova Balka in which Kaftanov's gang had been hiding out from the partisans for the past two weeks stood on a hill. One wondered how the few scattered cottages managed to get a footing on the steep slope. It seemed that if the wind blew a little harder they would all tumble down like empty boxes into a deep, clayey ravine that cut through the taiga. Four riders appeared on the crest of the hill. They were Kaftanov, his wall-eyed son Zinovy, Demian Iniutin, the former village elder of Mikhailovka, and the mysterious Kosorotov, of whom such terrible tales were told.

The night before a peasant had come running over from the next village to say that partisans had taken it.

"They're trying to close round us again, damn them! " Kaftanov raged. Trusting no one, he decided to go on reconnaissance that night to find out just how many partisans there were in the village. He took several of his most faithful men along.

Ivan was one of them, but he had left him behind to be with his daughter, Anna. Kosorotov, the former prison

warden, had captured her ten days before.

"I'm leaving you here as a guard and a suitor," Kaftanov said and smiled slyly. "And I expect you to be her husband by tomorrow morning."

Now, riding up to where Ivan sat outside the house, Kaftanov looked at him. His eyes were red after a sleepless night. "Well? Are you my son-in-law now?"

"She won't agree."

"You had my permission. Take that Red bitch by force, then."

"I can't. I can't do it that way."

"Ah, you yellow fool!" Kaftanov muttered and his matted red beard shook. "Well, you can blame yourself then. I've kept my part of the bargain."

Kaftanov, Zinovy and Kosorotov went into the house. Demian Iniutin swung his peg leg over the saddle and slid down to the ground. He stumped off, waddling like a duck, leading the four horses to a shed. Returning again, he said,

"I've noticed you've been acting sort of funny for a long time. That means something's screwy inside your head. And where will that lead you? Hm? That's something for Kaftanov to think about." He was silent for a few moments and seemed to be waiting for something. Then he added, "Just don't you forget that me and Mikhail Kosorotov are going to keep a sharp eye on you from now on."

"You!" Ivan shouted, jumped to his feet and pulled his sabre half-way out of the scabbard.

Perhaps something really was screwy inside his head, or perhaps there was another name for it. Be that as it may, something was happening inside of him, and Ivan Savelyev had sensed this something for quite a while.

He had first put it into words when he had spoken to a partisan he was supposed to have shot but then let go. Kruzhilin's man had raced off into the woods and Ivan, to be on the safe side and make sure Kaftanov heard, had fired into the air. Then he had sat down on a tree stump and wondered at the way things had turned out. The bandy-legged little peasant was a partisan. His brother Fyodor was also in Polikarp Kruzhilin's detachment. So was Anna. And even Kirill, peg-legged Demian Iniutin's son, was with

them. Those two, Anna and Kirill, should have by rights been on Kaftanov's side, while he should have been with Kruzhilin's men. But everything had become confused, everything was topsy-turvy.

"What am I fighting for? I'm helping Kaftanov protect his riches. What's it to me, even if he does? What'll I be, a groom in his stables again? No matter what happens, Anna'll be with Fyodor. And the way things look, neither Kaftanov nor anybody else'll be able to protect their riches any more. His gang'll soon be wiped out. Everybody'll be shot. I'll be killed either way. But what for? "

Colonel Zubov's regiment was soon brought in to wipe out Kruzhilin's detachment. Fierce battles followed and endless chases after the elusive partisans. Ivan had no time to ponder and think. Then followed something that left him stunned and shaken: his father's execution and the sudden partisan raid on the retreat. How had the partisans broken out of Green Dell? They couldn't have flown out certainly.

When a machine-gun began to clatter in the distance Ivan, who had been sleeping on the floor beside Kaftanov, came to his feet in a moment. He turned up the wick in the oil lamp although, perhaps, he should have put it out.

"What is it? Who's there? " Kaftanov shouted.

Zubov rushed in from the other room in his long underwear and also shouted, "What's the matter? What's going on there? "

Meanwhile, they could hear the shouting, the heavy thud of horses' hooves and the rifle shots outside.

No one said another word. They all realized what had happened and rushed for their clothes. Zubov dashed back into his room. A moment later he prodded his sleepy-eyed son out and threw on his own tunic.

"How'd it happen? " he shouted, as if someone knew the answer and did not want to tell him.

At that very moment the window was shattered, and Ivan's brother Fyodor appeared in the black square as in a frame. His eyes blazed.

Ivan had his finger on the trigger of his gun, but at the

sight of his brother he dropped his hand. Kaftanov, however, quickly raised his gun, but Zubov clutched his arm and shouted,

"Don't be crazy! Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Then he turned to Fyodor, who had jumped into the room, and said, "I surrender. This is my only son, Pyotr." He nudged the boy towards Fyodor. "I hope you will spare the child."

At that moment another figure appeared in the black square of the window.

"Anna!" The name flared in Ivan's mind.

Before she had a chance to jump down into the room Kaftanov bellowed something and fired at his daughter point-blank. She fell without a sound and rolled over on her side.

"Anna!"

Ivan had not shouted her name, nor had any one else. It was something roaring inside his head, becoming ever louder, until it burst and fell down tinkling, as the glass of the window had but a few minutes before.

Ivan seemed to become deaf. His mind was fuzzy. As in a dream, unable to comprehend what was happening, he saw the side door burst open and a short young man wearing a leather cap pushed back on his head fly into the room excitedly. It was Yakov Aleinikov.

"Ah, Colonel Zubov!" he must have shouted, although the sound of his voice barely reached Ivan. Yakov raised his sabre.

However, Zubov moved quickly and deflected the blow, knocking the sabre out of Yakov's hand and sending it arching through the air. Aleinikov quickly put the table between them and reached for his gun. Before he had a chance to draw, Zubov leaned across the table and brought his sabre down on Yakov, who grabbed at his face and crumpled.

Just then someone jerked Ivan's arm and whispered hoarsely, "Follow me! Quick!"

Ivan saw Kaftanov slip out through the door, but did not run after him. He did not know why, although Fyodor seemed to be shooting at him. Yes, he was. Once at him and once at Zubov, who was dashing about the room. The

bullets sank into the wall beside him, but Ivan did not budge. Fyodor finally seemed to have shot Zubov, whose body arched as he sank to the floor. However, he did not fall and began straightening up again. Fyodor fired again, but the trigger clicked. He had fired his last shot. He then fell upon the wounded colonel and slashed him with his sabre. Zubov fell beside Aleinikov. Zubov's son, who was cringing in a corner, screamed. The sound hung suspended in the air.

"Go on, Judas. Shoot."

It was Fyodor speaking. His breath came in gasps. Ivan was surprised to discover that he was aiming straight at his brother's damp forehead.

"No, you're my brother. I won't," he said and was telling the truth. He would not have fired, not even if Fyodor had swung his terrible sabre at him. "Anna, Anna, Anna!" the name hammered in his head. Gradually, a single clear thought emerged through the painful pounding: what was the use of living if Anna was no longer alive? Fyodor might as well slash him. He would rather let Fyodor do it than anybody else. He'd raise his sabre, swing it and end everything. That was the best way out. But still, he had raised his own gun and aimed at his brother. Why?

Meanwhile, Fyodor was inching quickly along the wall with his back to it, moving towards the corner where Zubov's son stood petrified.

"Yes, that's why. He wants to kill the boy," Ivan said to himself. Aloud he shouted, "Don't touch him! He's not to blame!"

"You louse!" Fyodor yelled. "Worried about the seed of other vermin! Save your pity for your own father! Think back to what they did to him!" He rushed at the boy.

Ivan sprang at him, so that as Fyodor's raised sabre was coming down he crashed into his shoulder, sending him spawling. The boy screamed one last time and clutched his face. Blood streamed between his fingers as he writhed beside his father's body. At last Ivan fired, but it was not at Fyodor. He had aimed at the wall lamp. The room was not plunged in darkness, though, because flames were curling into it from the roof. Ivan stumbled over Aleinikov

who moaned unexpectedly ("He's alive," Ivan said to himself), snatched up the boy and rushed out.

The yard was deserted and brightly lit by the blazing stable. The flames were doing a frantic dance in the black sky. Bright sheets of fire became detached and melted away, as if they had flown off into the darkness. The sound of firing reached him from the distant woods.

As Ivan dashed across the yard he kept expecting Fyodor to shoot him in the back, but no one pursued him. There were several rowboats pulled up on the bank. Ivan laid Petya Zubov on the bottom of one, shoved off, stuck his gun into his pocket and rowed swiftly into the darkness and towards the opposite bank, shattering the dancing, shimmering, fiery spots on the black surface of the lake with his oars.

"You! " Ivan shouted, jumped to his feet and grabbed his sabre.

"Stupid fool," Iniutin replied coolly and hobbled off, leaving deep dents in the ground with his pegleg.

Ivan sat down again. Indeed, he was a stupid fool. He still wondered why he had not let Fyodor kill him that night or, as a last resort, why he had not surrendered, but had escaped, rescuing the boy, the son of the man responsible for his own father's death. When Ivan reached the far bank he saw another rowboat and guessed that Kaftanov had also crossed the lake. He was right, for just then Kaftanov appeared from the bushes.

"Ivan? Good for you! We fell flat on our faces this time, didn't we? How did those dogs crawl out of that stone sack? "

Petya Zubov's cheek was badly slashed and he was whining like a puppy. Kaftanov tore off a strip of his shirt, bandaged the wound and mused aloud,

"He's an orphan now. The colonel told me his mother died when he was three. What'll I do with him? Maybe pack him off to Lusha? He'll have my boy for company. Maybe they'll be friends."

Kaftanov had been hiding his youngest son, six-year-old Makar, in various forest retreats in the wilderness,

having entrusted him to the care of Lusha Kashkarova, the village slut from Mikhailovka.

"Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll pack him off to Lusha," Kaftanov repeated. "And now, Ivan, let's you and me head into the forest, out of sin's way. It'll be light soon. I can't believe the partisans wiped out the entire regiment and all our men in Mikhailovka. How could they? That's impossible. They don't have the wherewithal. Still and all, we'll have to check. God looks out for him who looks out for himself, you know."

"But why'd you shoot Anna?" Ivan was unable to hold back any longer.

"Shut up! You'll get over it. That bitch deserved to be torn to pieces." He stalked off to the beach.

A late dawn was breaking. Ivan glared at Kaftanov's stooped back jogging ahead of him and wanted to pull out his gun and empty the whole clip into Kaftanov's stocky, hateful body. Ivan could not understand why he lacked the courage to do so, for the moment was so opportune. "I've had so many chances to do it," he said to himself. "It's probably because I am a stupid fool, just like Iniutin said."

That morning, after dawn had broken, they reached the forest road. It was freshly churned up by hooves, boots and wagon wheels, which meant Kruzhilin's detachment has passed through here to the east, to the woods beyond the swamp.

The partisans returned two weeks later, rested and well armed. Colonel Zubov's former regiment, having lost its commander, had been recalled and stationed somewhere else. There had been a change in the script, and now the partisans were hot on the heels of Kaftanov's gang, forcing it farther and farther into the upper reaches of the Gromotukha and finally into a ravine known as Zyatkovka Balka.

Ivan, as before, was Kaftanov's aide and bodyguard. He had become very thin, his eyes were sunken, he rarely spoke and was morose.

"Quit pining away! She's got nine lives like a cat, your Anna has," Kaftanov said.

"What?"

"Just what I said. She's alive. I should have fired coup-

le of more shots into her. But since she's alive, I won't go back on my word. We'll catch her."

"What? "

"Kosorotov'll catch her. I've sent him off to bring her back."

Mikhail Kosorotov had chosen to remain with Kaftanov when Zubov's regiment had been recalled.

"Where'd he go? " Ivan felt suddenly dazed.

"To get Anna. According to our information, she recovered from my bullet and she's riding around from village to village now, collecting woolen socks and mittens for the partisans. Kosorotov'll trap her someplace or other."

And he did. Kosorotov returned the following day, tossed the bound girl from his saddle and took the gag from her mouth. "Here she is," he said to Kaftanov.

"Anna? Anna! " Ivan shouted as he ran up to her.

"Was my boy Kirian there, too? " Demian Iniutin asked. "I'd like to get my hands on that fool." Then, stamping his pegleg several times, he added vaguely, "I wouldn't let Ivan marry her. I'd marry her myself."

Anna lay in the dust. Her hair was dishevelled, her face was blue, and she seemed half-strangled. Ivan wanted to untie her and help to her feet, but she managed to get up on to her knees herself, threw back her head and glared at him with such hatred that he stumbled back.

* * *

Kaftanov did not accept battle in Zyatkovskaya Balka but led his men to Lunevo Village which was about twenty kilometers away. As he was having his supper in one of the large cottages there he told Demian Iniutin to bring in his daughter from the barn where she was being kept under lock and key.

"So you don't want to marry, Ivan? This is the last time I'm asking you."

"Don't," Ivan said from where he sat on a bench by the window. He smiled painfully. "There's no use begging her. Let her off, Mikhail Lukich. It's all right."

"You mean you're giving her up? "

"I'd die for her. But what's the use? She'll never give me a crumb."

"What crumb?" Kaftanov demanded.

"I mean, in general. I can't beg her. Let her go. I'll pay you back twice over."

Kaftanov slammed down his wooden spoon and glared at him for a long moment. Then he glowered at his daughter. Anna stood by the door, leaning against the jamb. She had on a gray sweater, a creased black skirt, a pair of soft leather boots which hugged her shapely calves, a leather jacket thrown over on her shoulders and a cotton kerchief on her head. Strands of blond hair protruded from the kerchief. She was tall and well-built and was attractive despite her crude clothes.

"Well, you grew up to be a real sleek mare," Kaftanov said and snickered.

Anna had not uttered a word and did not react to this remark, either.

"Let's say I let you go. Will you run off to the partisans again?"

"Yes."

Kaftanov breathed noisily. Veins bulged on his damp temples. "You know that I've had a good life, Anna," he said in an unexpectedly soft voice. "I've drunk and whored, and lorded it over the people to my heart's content. To put it plainly, I'm fighting now so's I can lead this kind of a life a little longer. But what are you fighting for? What's your goal? How'd you end up with those lousy little partisans? Just on account of Fyodor?"

"Partly because of him."

"And what else?"

"I don't know. It's not all that's simple." She knitted her brows. Then they twitched and flew apart like wings. Her chest within the tight-fitting sweater began to heave. "You say you've lived. That kind of life of yours made my mother hang herself! What's there to boast about? You've lived like an animal. But there's a different kind of life. A human life! That's why I probably joined the partisans in the first place, because I've seen too much of your kind of life. I saw those orgies of yours at the retreat. But I want to live like a human being. That's why so much blood

is being shed. On account of this. Because people want to live like human beings. And they will."

"You don't say? See that you don't make a mistake."

"They will! And you'll be swept off the earth like dust out of the house, so as not to dirty up the place. See how far they've already chased you? "

"And if they'll have that kind of life, what makes you think they'll let you in? Sooner or later they'll remember whose daughter you are."

"They'll remember. But what they'll always remember is not whose daughter I am, but what sort of a human being I am, and whether I'm worthy of this new life. And they'll let me in. As for Ivan," she said, turning suddenly to the window where he was chain-smoking, "I think you should give this some thought, too. They hanged your father. And it was too much for you mother.... And she...."

"My mother? Mother...." Ivan jumped up and stood there, petrified. He did not feel the cigarette butt burning his fingers.

"Shut up! " Kaftanov brought the heavy ceramic bowl down upon the table. The sound it produced resembled a log being split in the frosty air. Bits of the bowl were flung to Anna's feet. Kaftanov rushed over to her. His hairy hands reached for her throat.

"Mikhail Lukich! " Ivan shouted and his sabre clinked as he pulled it from its sheath.

"What ... do you ... mean? " Kaftanov choked the words out with three pauses.

"She's your daughter. Leave her alone. Let her go wherever she wants to," Ivan repeated for the third time, wiped his damp brow and tossed his sabre into the corner.

Kaftanov trudged back to the table and sat down. "All right. Let her go. So she can bring the partisans back here."

"We'll pull up stakes and retreat. Who's to stop us? "

"You're talking sense there." As Kaftanov spoke his eyes, latticed with tiny, bulging red veins, seemed to be crawling over his daughter. "Have you been shacking up with Fyodor? " he asked insolently.

"You think everybody's like you." She pulled the

jacket together over her chest. "I'm not an animal like ... to live with a man I'm not married to."

"Like me? I see. You said that before. When's the wedding? "

"We'll invite you, don't worry."

Kaftanov's heavy hand was covered with blond hair. It gripped the edge of the table as if he were about to break off a chunk of the board that had been polished until it was as hard as rock and throw it at his daughter. "All right. Hey, guard! Take her away."

"You're too hot-headed, grabbing for your sabre like that," he said to Ivan after Anna had been led away.

"But you wanted to ... I thought...."

"Why should you care if she's...."

"I do care," Ivan said without raising his head.

"You've no pride. That's what's wrong with you. Well, it's your business. It's all the same to me. I can let her go, and she can sleep with Fyodor or any other stud there."

* * *

Ivan did not sleep a wink that night. "Mother, too. It's just the same as if they'd hanged her, too," he was thinking as he lay on the smelly horse-blanket. He felt as if something were gripping his heart and the pain flowed through his body.

A gray, pre-dawn gloom seeped in through the windows.

Kaftanov's bed creaked. "Are you awake, Ivan? " he said softly. "I'll go check the sentries." He started dressing quietly, trying not to make any noise. Then, boots in hand, he crept towards the door in his stocking feet and went outside.

There was nothing unusual about Kaftanov wanting to check the sentries posted around the village at night. Of late, no matter where they had made camp, he had always checked them himself or sent his son Zinovy to do it. Now, for some strange reason, Ivan was terror-stricken.

A strange and unaccountable anxiety had gripped him earlier that evening when he had watched Kaftanov's eyes

crawling over his daughter's body. Afterwards, Kaftanov had behaved strangely. He had paced up and down, lost in thought, for quite a while before finally retiring. Every now and then the large nostrils of his broad nose would flare, his lips, partly concealed by his moustache and beard, would twitch and his eyes would become glassy. Withal, he did not utter a word and finally fell into bed. He was snoring a moment later. Now Kaftanov had spoken softly and gotten dressed cautiously in order not to waken him. Ivan jumped up and ran over to the window.

Not a single light was burning in the village. In the shifting gloom he could make out a corner of the barn in which Anna was kept prisoner. A horse and buggy stood by the barn. He could see two moving figures. They disappeared and then reappeared with Anna, and she got in. Ivan guessed more than he actually saw of what was happening, and his heart began to pound. "Where are they taking her? Are they letting her go? He said he was going out to check the sentries."

Ivan stared out of the window until his eyes hurt. One of the men (judging by the shape it was Kaftanov) got in beside her and picked up the reins. The other limped towards the cottage.

Ivan pulled on his pants hastily and began winding his foot cloths. Then, throwing on his jacket, he dashed out of the door.

"Where are you going?" Demian Iniutin demanded, blocking his way.

"Move!" Ivan wanted to push the one-legged man aside, but Demian raised his pegleg like a spear and rammed the wooden tip into Ivan's stomach. Ivan doubled over and sank to the floor. When his mind cleared Iniutin was holding a gun on him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Where ... Where'd he take Anna?"

"He'll take her to the right place. Put her right and let her go. We're breaking camp in an hour. Go on, get your hands in back of you! And start walking. You stay put till he gets back. He'll decide what to do about you then. Go on, into the barn. And don't try any funny business or you'll be sorry."

Ivan crossed his hands in back of him and headed towards the barn. "He's going to kill her. I just know it."

"He's her father. He can do whatever he wants to. Go on! "

They reached the barn, and Ivan crossed the threshold. However, as Iniutin raised his hand to shut the heavy door, Ivan sprang upon him like a cat, knocked him over, wrenched his gun away and struck him on the temple full-force with the butt. Iniutin grunted, jerked and was still.

Ivan straightened up. He stood there in a daze for a moment, wondering whether he had killed Iniutin.

The former elder of Mikhailovka Village had stopped breathing. Ivan rolled the body into the barn and shut the door, but did not bother to lock the padlock. He ran for his horse.

There were several roads leading out of Lunevo. He did not know which one Kaftanov had taken. However, there were sentries posted at every road. At the first two they said that neither Kaftanov nor anyone else had left the village. The third, a sleepy youth, said,

"The chief? He and his daughter went that way. Where'd he take her, Ivan? "

Ivan did not bother to reply. He spurred his horse on down the forest road that disappeared in the dirty-blue light of early morning.

If not for his horse Ivan would never have caught up with Kaftanov that morning. He would never have seen Anna again. He would never have known what had happened to her or how she had disappeared from the face of the earth. For the first five kilometers his horse galloped along the dusty, trampled road but then, despite the fact that Ivan whipped him on mercilessly, he cut his speed, threw back his head unexpectedly and whinnied loudly. A small mare replied a moment later. The sound came from nearby. "It's Kaftanov's mare! " Ivan turned his horse, which sensed that his master's desires and his own were the same and galloped back along the road obediently, turning off and cutting through the low bushes to a clearing. There the horse pulled up short so that its hooves slid on the dewy grass.

Kaftanov's horse and buggy were at the edge of the

clearing beneath a branching black pine tree. A little off to a side Anna lay on the ground, her bare legs gleaming white, as Kaftanov trotted away from her in a strange, sideways, loping gait. He was slightly stooped, and the buckles of his leather shoulder straps jingled as he pulled his long-barrelled Mauser gun from its wooden holster.

The scene burst upon Ivan in a flash and in a split-second he realized what had happened. That very instant a powder keg exploded inside his head. Something hot and acrid gripped his brain. Kaftanov's words finally penetrated.

"Say your prayers, Ivan. You'll carry what you've seen here to your grave. This is something nobody will live to talk about."

Through the drifting blackness Ivan made out Kaftanov's flushed, sweaty face. He stood three steps away, buttoning his jacket with his left hand and aiming the black, sooty barrel of his Mauser at him with his right.

Ivan could not recall either having dismounted or caught up with Kaftanov. "What'd you do! What'd you do! "

"That's something you'll never understand. But she knows why. You were a fool for coming here. You would have gone on living if you didn't."

Ivan knew he would be killed in another moment. Although he was also armed, Kaftanov would never let him draw, nor even more. He stood still. His long arms hung at his sides. A short cavalry crop dangled from his right wrist.

The black eye of Kaftanov's gun moved. "Now! Now! " the thought flashed across Ivan's mind. Nor longer hoping for a miracle, he raised his crop swiftly, slashed Kaftanov's face and rushed at him. Kaftanov fired. Ivan felt as if someone had struck his shoulder with a heavy pole. He did not know whether he was dying or just wounded and did not realize that Kaftanov had covered his eyes with his free hand. He swung his crop again, bringing it down on Kaftanov's other hand and gun. The gun fell. Ivan threw himself upon Kaftanov. His hands went for the hairy bristly neck. They fell to the ground together, with Ivan on top.

"Ivan!" Kaftanov rasped, tossing his head so that his beard scratched Ivan's face.

Kaftanov was the stronger of the two. He braced himself against Ivan's bloody chest and threw him off, but before he had a chance to get up, Ivan snatched the Mauser from the ground, rushed at Kaftanov, who was now half-way to his feet, pushed him back, shoved the Mauser into his chest and pulled the trigger twice.

He did not hear the shots. What he did hear was the horses snorting and then galloping off to the far end of the clearing.

* * *

The sun had long since risen, and its cold rays shot above the woods. A breeze was drying the moist, dewy grass. The horses had long since quietened down and stood facing each other. Kaftanov's mare was rubbing her jowl against the stallion's narrow head. It soon tired of these carresses and wandered off to graze.

A squirrel darted about in the large pine over the buggy, sending down showers of dry yellow needles.

Kaftanov lay peacefully in the grass. His arms were spread wide and he seemed to be sleeping. Anna lay on her back as silently and still at the edge of the clearing and was still in shadow. Ivan sat beside her. His vacant, unblinking eyes stared off into space.

Tears streamed from Anna's closed eyes. Ivan's left shoulder was bloody.

If not for these tears and this blood, nothing would have hinted at the tragedy that had taken place here but half an hour before. It would merely seem as though three travellers had stopped here to rest, that two were already asleep in the grass and that the third was watching over them.

Another half an hour passed. Suddenly, Anna sat up. She was dishevelled, her face was terrible and she screamed hysterically.

"Why'd you come here? He was going to shoot me after! Why'd you come? Now you kill me! Shoot me!



Shoot me!" She fell back again and rolled about in the grass, howling like a wounded animal, beating her dishevelled head against the ground. Ivan did not try to soothe her, but sat there as motionlessly as before. When at last she fell silent from exhaustion, he said softly,

"You have to go on living, Anna. No one'll ever know about it. But you have to go on living."

* * *

That very evening a horse and buggy drove into Zyat-kova Balka, which was now occupied by the partisans. The buggy was surrounded by armed men. Someone shouted.

"Look! It's Anna! Fyodor! Your girl's back! "

Kruzhilin, Aleinikov and Pankrat Nazarov came out of the cottage opposite.

"What's going on? Where'd you come from, Anna?" Kruzhilin called and, coming closer and recognizing Ivan, he frowned and said, "Savelyev?"

"Yes."

"Oh, so you've come in yourself, you Whiteguard scum!" Fyodor shouted as he elbowed his way through the crowd.

For some reason or other Ivan pulled Kaftanov's body out of the buggy with his good hand. Then he said, "Here's my chief, though he's dead, and here I am. I've come to surrender." He sat down on the grass beside the body. "If you want to shoot me, do it now."

"This fellow won't be around long," Yakov Aleinikov said as he fingered the fresh scar on his cheek. "Come on into the cottage. We'll talk it over and take care of you quick."

Ivan rose and followed them in without looking either to the right or the left. Anna, who had seemed indifferent to all that was going on until then, looked up quickly, shoved Fyodor aside and screamed,

"Don't! Don't! You've got to listen to him! Don't! " She darted at Kruzhilin, Aleinikov and Nazarov like a black bird as they led Ivan off to the cottage.

Part One

THE BROTHERS

Dima glanced at the clacking tin wall clock and jumped out of bed. It was ten to seven.

The village was bathed in fog. The tops of the trees showed hazily above the damp roofs of the nearby houses. Farther on everything was submerged in the milky fog, and even the fire-tower on the hill at the end of the street had disappeared.

Dima stood shivering in his shorts and undershirt, looking over the slippery, blackened wattle fence now to the right, into the Iniutins' yard, now to the left, into the Kashkarov's yard. However, neither Kolya Iniutin nor Vitya Kashkarov were anywhere to be seen. "They're still in the sack," Dima said to himself and yawned. "A lot of fish they'll catch this way." And he went to wash up in the Gromotushka.

The tall corn stalks dropped dew upon his shoulders that felt like burning embers and the wet potato vines burned his feet. They were numb and covered with hard goosepimples like cucumbers.

Dima ran down to the river, sat on a flat stone and sank his feet into the warm water and the sandy bottom. Tiny, tickling gudgeons attacked his toes and calves. "You, there," he said and wiggled his toes.

The gudgeons darted away, spread out like a fan, stopped, thought things over, seemed to whisper among themselves and then headed back cautiously, but all together again.

The Gromotushka was a wonderous little river. It was as clear as glass, and very narrow. In some spots you could even jump across it. There were quiet, shallow pools beneath an overhanging tangle of branches. The little river, practically a stream, had its source someplace far beyond Shantara, in the Altai Mountains, and meandered through

the steppe until it reached their village. The steppe was barren. There was not a single bush in sight, and only the bare, depressing hills that rose here and there provided any change in the scenery. However, the banks of the Gromotushka were overgrown with trees and bushes, and they extended about forty meters into the steppe. There were aspens and birches, and snowball trees, and thickets of wild cherry and wild currant bushes. However, there were more towering weeping willows than any other kind of tree. All of this was entwined by hops, tangled blackberry bushes and vines.

The thickets were known as Gromotushka's Bushes. Although they were not very deep, for if you turned in any one direction you would soon come out into the open, they were so dense in places and so frightening that the women of Shantara who went berry picking there would suddenly become terror-stricken. Then they would dash pell-mell into the steppe again, scattering the berries in their pails and leaving shreds of clothing on the briars. Once out in the open, they would breathe in the pungent, sage-blown air greedily, pressing their hands to their heaving breasts.

They said Gromotushka's Bushes held many a secret. Perhaps as a berry-picker made her way into the depths of a thicket these secrets would reveal themselves to her subconscious. Or perhaps the women would suddenly imagine the blood-curdling scream of the shaggy wood goblin who had, according to legend, always inhabited the largest pool on the Gromotushka, giving it its name: Goblin's Pool. There were women in Shantara who swore that they had not only heard the terrible scream but had actually seen the water in the terrible pool begin to boil at sunup or sundown as something black and huge began to move around in the rank water, sending waves in all directions.

Gromotushka's Bushes thinned out near the village, with the aspens and birches not far behind and the snowball trees ending a bit closer. The little river continued onward, winding its way through the village vegetable gardens and along its narrow streets. Only the willows adorned its banks here and they bowed low as always to their lord and master.

The river left the village and flowed across a low meadow where it was met by impassable thickets of sedge and reeds, and here it slipped into the broad Gromotukha.

There was an abundance of every kind of fish in the Gromotukha, while in the stream there were only little gudgeons and greylings in its upper reaches and pools. The mighty Gromotukha froze solid in winter. Some years the ice on it was a meter and a half deep, but the Gromotushka had never yet been covered over with even a film of ice.

No snowdrifts had ever covered it, for the snow melted in the shallow water as in a cauldron. The frost could not stop its flow. All winter long the little river steamed, sending white billows up over Gromotushka's Bushes as they might rise above a steaming bathhouse, making the trees droop under the weight of the shaggy festoons of ice that covered their branches. If you touched one the slivers of ice would come rustling down, quite as if the branch had cast off its clothing, but in three or four hours it would again become covered with icicles, appearing more shaggy than it had before.

The most bitter frost could not conquer the Gromotushka. On such days the fog above the river would be more dense, the ice on the trees heavier, but no more.

Dima splashed some water on his freckled face and glanced back and forth across the wattle fence again. "Boy, they sure sleep late."

Just then a door creaked in Lusha Kashkarova's house. She appeared and hurried out to the barn.

The edge of the sun had probably risen above Zvenigora, for the fog was now touched with pink and gold. Soon the fire-tower appeared in silhouette, and then shreds of red-tinted fog seeped through the poplar branches, lighting up every twig.

The hens began to cackle wildly in Lusha's barn. A few moments later the old woman came out, carrying a kitchen knife in one hand and a slaughtered chicken in the other.

"Granny Lusha," Dima called, walking over to the fence. "What's Vitya doing? We were supposed to go fishing today."

"Fishing? Who said so?" she replied quickly, and her voice sounded frightened. "He won't go anyplace today!

Oh, those boys! Lord, forgive me." And she disappeared into the house. Dima heard her throw the bolt.

"How do you like that?" he muttered. "Locking the door in the morning. Why'd she do that?"

Pale yellow sunbeams broke through the drifting fog in the trees. There were many beams, both broad as swords and narrow as strings. As before, the shreds of fog swirled and dangled about them, making the sun beams seem to sway as they fingered the earth.

The loudspeaker on the square outside the large log house set on a brick foundation that was the District Party Committee headquarters came to life.

"Attention! This is Moscow speaking," the announcer said, loud enough for everyone in the village to hear. "Good morning, comrades. Today is Sunday, June 22nd."

"How could it be morning in Moscow? It's still only 3 a.m. there. The sun is just coming up," Dima said to himself.

The announcer's voice was followed by a song, a fine song, which Dima always liked to hear:

*Morning tints with gentle color
Walls so ancient, Kremlin walls....*

Although it was still night in Moscow, which was so far away, Dima visualized the sun tinting the brick walls of the Kremlin which he had only seen on pictures or in the movies.

His brother Semyon came out of the house, squinted in the sun and stretched so his joints cracked. He suddenly did a handstand and headed towards the Gromotushka on his hands. As he passed a carrot row he bent his elbows easily, pulled up a small, pale carrot with his teeth and carried it thus to the stream.

This was one of his tricks. Semyon was a member of a sambo-wrestling group and could do harder things than that. Dima, who was painfully jealous of his elder brother, turned away indifferently.

Semyon rinsed the carrot in the stream and bit off half of it with a loud crunch. He winked at Dima and said, "Well?"

"Well what? You mean walking on your hands? So what? "

"You don't say? Why don't you try it then? "

"I will, too! " Dima shouted and tried to do a handstand, "I'll fall on my back sure as anything," was the thought that flashed through his mind. "I'll crush the potato vines. Ma'll kill me." No sooner had he thought this than his mother's voice came crashing about his ears.

"Go on! Just you try and break the vines! Dima! "

He fell flat on his back into the potato rows.

His mother cried out. The sight of her frightened eyes so close to his face made him jump up.

"Well? Well? " she urged, tugging at his sleeve. Then she turned to Semyon. "What're you teaching him to do? What if he breaks an arm or a leg? "

Seeing that his mother was distracted for a moment, Dima ran for it.

* * *

There was always a dead silence at the table in the Savelyev house. Fyodor Silantyevich, the head of the family, could not stand conversation at meals.

But today the sacred tradition was broken by ten-year-old Andrei, the youngest in the family. After every two or three spoonfuls he would sniffle and say, "Ma-aa, can I go fishing with them? "

Anna Mikhailovna, Savelyev's wife, said nothing, as if she had not heard her son's pleading voice.

"Oh, let him go. It won't hurt him," Semyon finally said.

His father threw down his spoon and wiped his moist black moustache angrily. "Listen here, Semyon. When I was your age I was in command of a squadron and cut off more Whiteguard heads than I can count." For some reason or other Fyodor pointed to the wall behind him and the portrait of his father, Silanty Savelyev, that had been enlarged from an old photograph. "Even though you've been a tractor driver for two years, you're still a kids' shepherd."

Semyon looked at the picture. His father resembled his grandfather very much. He had the same large forehead and eyebrows joined at the bridge of his nose, the same moustache above a large lower lip, the same straight nose and flaring nostrils, the same thick, unruly black hair. However, his father's chin was different. His grandfather had had a flat, cleft chin, while his father had a large protruding lower jaw covered with heavy bristle that was as stiff as iron.

"This isn't wartime, Dad. My tractor's my squadron."

Fyodor turned away to the window, lit a cigarette and hit the shutters with his palm. A large sunflower that was just about to blossom swayed gently outside the window. It was green and prickly, and covered with drops of morning dew. Several yellow petals had peeped out from the very center of the flower like little yellow flames.

"So you're going fishing?"

"It's Sunday, isn't it? I've got my tractor in running order."

"My combine's oiled and cleaned, too. What about helping your comrades? Or do you think it'll kill you if you do?"

"They can manage without me. I've been breathing gasoline all week, and I'd like some nice fresh river air for a change."

"Ma-aa, can I go fishing with them?" Andrei whined.

"What a nag!" Anna snapped. "All right, go ahead."

Andrei was off of his stool and out of the room like a shot. Dima was right behind him. "The way I see it, they've got used sitting around while others do their work for them," Semyon said, rising.

"Who them?"

"Anikii Yelizarov, for instance. He's the laziest man around here. Or your friend, that drunk Kirian Iniutin. The two of them should have been kicked out of the machine and tractor station long ago, but you go on helping them. Well, that's your business. My conscience won't let me." He left the room.

"You're a stupid fool," his father said to his back.

"Fyodor!" Anna exclaimed.

"Shut up! Shut up!" Fyodor paced up and down for

a while and then spoke more calmly. "There's something Semyon doesn't understand. And it's the whole idea of our way of life. That's what makes me mad. Well, I'll be going. Wrap up something for me for lunch. I'll be working in the shop till this evening."

When Fyodor had gone Anna sat down by the window and gazed out at the sunflower that was about to blossom. She suddenly had a strange feeling that it would never bloom, that it would never lift its bright face to the sun and wiped the tears that welled up in her eyes with a corner of her apron.

She knew very well why Fyodor had never liked his eldest son. Both of the younger ones, Dima and Andrei, resembled their father. Both had large foreheads, heavy brows and black hair. They even walked like he did, especially Dima, whose step was firm and confident, and slightly rolling, and whose deep-set dark eyes were as flashing and keen as Fyodor's. Semyon, however, resembled her. He was gray-eyed, blond and fair-skinned.

"We must have conceived him in the cellar. Is that where it was?" Fyodor had often said when Semyon was little. And he would grimace under his black moustache, sending a chill down her spine, for she sensed that he did not for a moment believe he was the child's father.

One day she tried to shame him for his unfounded suspicions. He listened to her in silence and when he finally understood what she was getting at he brought his hand down on the hewn table with a loud slap and said, "That's enough! I know all about that. You were no virgin when I married you! "

"Fyodor! "

"What?" Fyodor raised his voice and turned pale. "I said that's enough." He leaned his elbows on the table, thrust his fingers into his thick black hair and curled them into fists. He sat there thus for a few moments. "We won't bring this up again, Anna," he said, raising his murky, brooding eyes to her face. "You should be slashed in two, you bitch, but I love you anyway. Besides, there's Dima now. This one's my boy."

"And whose is Semyon? Answer me! "

"We'll end this here and now!" Fyodor shouted. "I

don't ever want to hear you talking about it again! Not a single word! If you want us to go on living as a family."

And they did go on living. The neighbors would not have said that their's was a bad life. Fyodor was stern and reticent, but he'd always bring her something for her birthday, or on a special occasion. These were usually small presents like a cotton kerchief or a colored glass brooch. But it wasn't a matter of cost, and he seemed to treat Semyon as he did the other boys, never setting him apart from them. But sometimes, like today, he would snap at him for no good reason. And then again, at night sometimes something would come over him and he would lie as still as death all through the night. Anna could sense the harsh glitter of his eyes in the gloom. She knew what that meant. Finally, Fyodor would pull her towards him silently and roughly, he would press her small breasts and squeeze her shoulders viciously, leaving blue marks and bruises. She sensed that he was subconsciously getting even with her for having had Semyon, and that the beast in him had been awakened.

"Fyodor! Fyodor! " she would cry out in terror.

The sound of her voice would bring him back to his senses and he would let her go.

Anna did not exonerate Fyodor, but she understood his torment. Semyon was his own flesh and blood. She certainly knew that much, but she could not convince him of it. And he had a right to doubt her.

Thus did they live on. The neighbors would not have said that their's was a bad life. But no one could say whether Anna loved her husband or not. She did not know herself any longer. There was a time when she had been madly, wildly in love with him, when her love had engulfed him like a July downpour engulfs the earth. Streams of rainwater gush along the ground. The low meadows are inundated, and only the tallest daisies bob above the bubbling, rain-splattered surface. The rain makes the waters of the broad Gromotukha muddy, but the downpour continues, whipping the earth and filling the air with the sound of it.

After a while the streams of water let up. It seems then that someone has passed a great sieve across the torrents,

cutting the streams into drops, and although they still fall rapidly, these are drops, and not streams of water. First, the heavy drops fall and then the smaller ones for a long while after. Finally, the rain stops. Puddles drain off along the ditches and ravines into the greedy Gromotukha. In the grassy knolls the water seeps through the ground slowly and is absorbed, leaving a layer of silt on the bottom to gleam like oily slick in the sun. But the silt dries quickly, becoming a crust. Several hours later it cracks and curls at the edges like birch bark. Then the heat turns it into dust. The breeze catches up the dust and carries it off, it makes the white daises and the other grass that but recently shivered and bobbed in the downpour sway.

Once in a while Anna would recall her last conversation with her accursed father. "What's there to boast about? You've lived like an animal," she had shouted at the hateful, hairy face. "But there's a different kind of life. A human life! ... I want to live like a human being." And he had said so mockingly, "If they'll have that kind of a life, what makes you think they'll let you in? Sooner or later they'll remember whose daughter you are."

No one reminded her about whose daughter she was. But the kind of life she had dreamed about and had so wished for had never materialized. At first, she believed that her beast of a father was to blame. Then she began to wonder whether the blame was his alone after all.

* * *

All the streets of Shantara Village seemed to flow down to the Gromotukha. The dirt beds of the streets were covered with fine dust from being constantly in use, but the crooked lanes that so rarely saw a wagon wheel or a truck were green and grassy, and some had so many weeds and burdocks growing along them they were all but impassible.

The main street, known as the High Road, was paved with cobblestones. There were rain ditches along the sides, each of which was bordered by a row of planted poplars and a wooden sidewalk.

On this early Sunday morning the three Savelyev boys and Kolya Iniutin, a stooped and lanky fifteen-year-old who resembled a question mark, were walking down the deserted High Road.

"I looked over the fence and saw your sister yelping at you," Semyon said. "I was sure she'd never let you go."

"All Vera wanted to know was where we were going fishing. I said to the Gromotukha. Will you do a 'cart wheel'?"

"Yes," Semyon replied absently.

Leaving the village, they turned into the steppe that was becoming yellow, passed the line of wooden high-voltage line poles and cross-pieces spotted with bird droppings, then on to a green meadow which took them to a narrow creek. Vitya Kashkarov finally caught up with them there. He and Dima were of the same age.

"Hey! Your ma said she wouldn't let you go," Dima shouted.

"So what?" Vitya was still out of breath from running. He averted his troubled eyes.

The sun was simmering in the clear blue sky, banishing the last of the morning fog, streaming down upon the earth in scorching torrents. The sun-spots on the water hurt their eyes. There were hardly any sun-spots near the bank, but about three meters out golden saucers swayed upon the surface. The farther away from the bank, the more there were, until they finally blended into a glittering strip in the middle of the creek.

The boys quickly baited their hooks and then stared anxiously at their floats. Tiny drops of perspiration appeared on Andrei's peeling nose from the tenseness of the moment. Vitya Kashkarov, however, was in no hurry. He slowly tied his line to his rod and then seemed to forget about it and everything else as well. He stood staring off into the distance to the little island where weeping willows on a small rise trailed their supple branches in the flowing stream.

"I got it!" Dima hollered and pulled out a small ide.

Andrei's heart skipped a beat from envy, and he began jerking his line.

"Don't be in such a hurry," Semyon said. He then

glanced at Vitya, who was sitting on a stone, still staring off towards the island.

Dima scooped up a pail of water and tossed the fish into it. It thrashed around frantically. Kolya Iniutin stuck the end of his rod into the sand, came up and thrust his hooked nose into the pail, at which his resemblance to a question mark became still more apparent.

"It'll do," he said condescendingly. "Last week I was fishing near Zvenigora. The minute I cast my line I had a bite! Crr-rack! My rod just snapped into two. The fish dragged the broken half off towards the middle of the river. I dived right in after it in my clothes and shoes."

"Quit lying," Semyon said.

"Who's lying? You know how big that perch was? And it got away. I couldn't catch it."

"How d' you know it was a perch?" Dima asked.

"What else could it be? It had stripes like a zebra. That's the only kind of striped fish there is."

Andrei's float suddenly moved off and sank. This was so unexpected he plopped into the wet sand, then jumped up and yanked the line. It swished through the air, bringing the float up out of the water with a large popping sound to vibrate on the taut horsehair string. Andrei began backing away, pulling at the line as a big fish, and he could feel it struggling on the hook, tried to pull him down. The dry willow rod bent and creaked, and the float touched the water again. It was going to disappear in the cold deep again.

"It'll tear the line!" Vitya shouted coming to with a start.

"Play the line out! Don't let him get away! Watch out!"

"Leave me alone!" Andrei protested in a piping voice.

"Leave him alone. Let him pull it in himself, Vitya," Semyon said and smiled broadly as he watched his younger brother.

Dima and Kolya had dropped their rods and were prancing about, giving Andrei all sorts of valuable advice, but he was not listening to them, either.

He was biting the tip of his tongue excitedly and battling the fish. Then, finally, deciding to give it one last

try, he yanked at the line as hard as he could. The float popped out of the water again, trailing a huge perch that looked as though it were trying to catch up with it; the yellow-green fish described a glittering arc in the air fought free of the hook and fell with a loud plop onto the stones by the edge of the water. Andrei screamed excitedly and fell upon his prey, pressing it to the ground with his body. Then he laughed delightedly.

Afterwards, the boys admired the snub-nosed, hump-backed monster enviously, and each of them held it for a moment.

"Put it in the pail. It can't live out of water long," Andrei said casually, as if he had lost all interest in the fish, and then baited his hook again. "What's the matter? Didn't you ever see a fish before?"

"Boy, you sure are lucky. Big fish like that hardly ever rise to a worm."

"It's not all that big," Kolya muttered, lowering the perch into the pail. "I remember last year I was fishing on the Gromotushka. Vera and me went to pick currants. I always take my line along, and I decided to catch four or five graylings so's we could have chowder for dinner. Vera loves chowder," he explained. "We're picking berries right near Goblin's Pool."

"Where'd you say you were?" Semyon asked, looking up from his float.

"You heard me." Kolya's sun-bleached lashes blinked rapidly. "Near Goblin's Pool. You know how many currants there are there? The place is full of them. That's because the women are scared to go there. But Vera loves berries, and she said we'd go, so we did. What's the matter? Don't you believe me?"

"Go on, keep on lying," Dima said as he stared into the pail, comparing his ide and Andrei's perch.

"Who's lying?" Kolya sounded offended.

They fished in silence for another quarter of an hour, but no one had a single bite. Andrei, in his desire to cast his line farther out, had waded waist-deep into the water. Each time he baited a new worm he would spit on it meticulously, imagining that this would make it seem tastier to the fish. But all was in vain.

The sun was high in the sky, and the heat was consuming its blueness, making the heavens a milky-white. The heat descended in waves, muting all sounds except the lapping of the sipples as they licked at the hot, round stones. White butterflies kept alighting on the wet stones. Their black veined wings trembled slightly as they perched there until the next wave washed over the stone.

"What'd you catch in Goblin's Pool?" Semyon asked.

"Nothing," Kolya muttered. However, a few moments later he continued, "It was real scary over there at the edge of the pool. I kept thinking about the goblin. What if it was hiding in the bushes? My heart was going a mile a minute. Vera was poking around in the bushes. Well, anyway, I got real close and...."

"Did you see him? Did you see the goblin?" Dima demanded breathlessly.

Vitya turned towards Kolya, too, leaving his line unattended, but he was not looking at Kolya. He was looking past him vacantly at a small, fleecy cloud that had suddenly appeared on the horizon. Andrei was the only one who was still fishing. He stood in the water, leaning so far forward he was barely able to keep his balance, and held his rod at arm's length. His hand had become numb, but he never once took his eyes from his float.

"Anyway, there was a pair of real big graylings right near the surface. 'Well', I said to myself. I cast my line real careful so's not to scare them off. The bait didn't even hit the water. They both jumped for it! One of them swallowed the hook and headed down. Then, all of a sudden..."

"The goblin started hooting in the bushes!" Dima taunted.

"It's the honest truth, and you..." Kolya tossed his cropped head. "The minute it went down, a huge mound rose up in the middle of the pool. And the water began to bubble! Boy, was I scared! All my bones began to shake. If you think you're so brave, I'd like to have seen you there. And then, on top of everything, a huge, forked fish-tail rose up in the middle of the pool." Kolya spread his arms wide, showing them just how big the tail was. "And then it came down on the water with a loud slap. I was

drenched. That's when my line was yanked so hard it went *ping!* "

"It tore! " Andrei breathed. He had come out onto the bank for another worm. "What was it, Kolya? A pike? "

"I don't know," Kolya heaved a sigh.

"Sure it was. Daddy said there's pike in the big pools on the Gromotushka."

"Maybe it was."

"It was probably a shark." Dima's smile was mocking. "Only sharks have forked tails like that."

"You never believe anything! "

In some ways Kolya was a very unusual boy, for things were forever happening to him. Someone's dog tore his pants. Then, a firecracker went off in his pocket during class, taking a chunk out of his leg.

Three years before he had bet the boys he would yank some hair out of the chairman's mean stallion Brown Falcon for his fishing line. The stallion was of an unusual breed. His coat was brown-black, while his mane and flowing tail were snow-white. "That's because he's a merino," the groom Yevsei, who took the stallion out to graze at night, told the boys. Then, seeing that they didn't understand a learned word like that, he added angrily, "Go on, get going! All you want to do is get some hair. He'll give you more than that. He'll give you a good conk on the head, that's what he'll do." Then, hobbling the stallion with a strong horsehair rope, he walked off, as straight as stiff as a ramrod.

Brown Falcon's white tail tantalized them, but no one had ever yet managed to yank a single hair out of it. The stallion would only let Old Yevsei tend him. If anyone else approached, he would throw back his head, bare his large, flat teeth like a dog and turn his rump menacingly towards whoever it was.

Late one evening, when Old Yevsei had taken the stallion out to pasture as usual, they set off to settle the bet.

"Watch me from here," Kolya said, stopping about two hundred meters from the stallion. "Don't try to get any closer."

"Why not? " Dima wanted to know.

"It's too dangerous. What if he gets mad and attacks you? Then I'll be responsible."

This had the desired effect. The boys stopped. As Kolya headed towards the horse, they watched with bated breath, envying his courage and daring.

The stallion had been nibbling at the grass. As Kolya approached he raised his head and whinnied. Fear gripped the boys' entrails. However, Kolya did not slacken his step, but continued on slowly, holding out one hand. A moment later he was standing beside the stallion, stroking the animal's flat cheek calmly. It was a miracle. The boys gaped. They never dreamed he had been taming the stallion for a month before.

One morning when Kolya had taken their cow out to pasture with village herd he noticed that before Old Yevsei untied the rope used to hobble the stallion he gave him a chunk of rye bread. Brown Falcon took the bread and then rubbed his cheek against the old man's rough hand. Kolya snickered and sat down to think on the dewy grass.

When he went back to the meadow that evening he brought along a large chunk of rye bread. No sooner had the old man hobbled the horse and trudged off back to the village than Kolya headed towards the horse. He was holding a long stick with the bread impaled on the end of it.

Brown Falcon shied away from the stick the next few evenings. He bared his yellow teeth viciously and turned his rump towards Kolya. However, the tempting smell of the bread gradually did the trick, and one evening Brown Falcon took it off the stick gingerly.

A week later he was eating out of Kolya's hand, and a week after that he let the boy stroke his silky cheek.

Kolya decided that he had achieved his goal and that it was time to surprise and stun his friends.

After having given the stallion some bread which he had hidden inside his shirt, he stroked Brown Falcon's cheek for a few moments, then patted his strong arched neck and ran his hand along the animal's body. The stallion shivered and turned his head. His purple eye flashed. "What's the matter, silly?" Kolya said gently. The familiar voice seemed to reassure the horse. He stopped shivering and went back to nibbling the grass.

As Kolya stroked the stallion's side with one hand the fingers of his other were carefully separating a strand of hair from the nest of his tail. He then wound the strand around his fist and jumped aside, yanking as hard as he could. However, either the hair was very strong or greed had made Kolya take a strand that was too big. Be that as it may, he did not pull out a single hair. The stallion pranced. His hooves churned up the ground. Kolya wanted to escape, but the hair he had wound around his fist would not come unwound. The stallion kicked out. Miraculously, his hind legs did not split the boy's head. Kolya struggled frantically to free his hand. Just then Brown Falcon turned sharply and bit Kolya's side.

When the boys came running up, Kolya was lying motionlessly on the grass. A bloody flap of skin nearly as big as his palm hung from his naked side.

Kolya moaned, opened his eyes, sat up and looked at his bleeding wound. He took off his torn shirt, ripped it into narrow strips, put the flap of skin back into place and began bandaging the wound in silence. "I guess I'll have to go to the hospital," he said and stood up.

The wound was attended to, but the white, horseshoe-shaped scar remained on his olive-skinned body. From that day forward Kolya Iniutin was nicknamed Brown Falcon.

Despite the fact that he was forever getting into such fixes, Kolya was known as the biggest braggart and liar. Perhaps this was because he always exaggerated and enhanced every event and sometimes even lied when he was describing anything that had really happened to him.

Having told them about his encounter at Goblin's Pool, Kolya walked off in a huff and sat down on a hot stone.

"I'm sick and tired of fishing like this!" Andrei shouted. He waded out of the water and flung down his rod. "I haven't had a single bite."

Semyon had his back to the stream and was gazing across the steppe at the road and the man on it. He passed the poles of the high-voltage line and turned left at the fork in the road, away from the river and towards Zvenigora Pass.

"Who's that man going to Mikhailovka, Dima?" Semyon said.

"A plain, ordinary man. He's wearing boots, and he has a walking stick, and a sack over his shoulder," said Dima, who had the keen eyes of a hawk.

"Does he look like Uncle Ivan?"

"It can't be him. He's in jail."

At this, Vitya Kashkarov, who had been sitting off by himself for some time, jumped up and looked after the man going towards the pass. Then he sat down again and stared solemnly at his scuffed bare feet.

"I thought it was. He's stoop-shouldered, just like Uncle Ivan," Semyon said in an undertone.

Heavy sunbeams poured down upon the earth as if to melt it. The sizzling stones at the water's edge, washed over by the warm, languid ripples, would dry in seconds. The white butterflies that had been darting about just half an hour before had disappeared. The sky was still clear, except for a huge column of hospital-white clouds where a tiny wad of cotton had but recently appeared beyond the shimmering haze. The top of the cloud-column was much broader than the base. Topped by a huge cap, it was tilted over from the weight of it and seemed about to topple right onto Shantara.

"I'll tell you what, men," Semyon said, pulling off his shirt. "The fish won't bite till evening anyway. Let's go swimming, and then we can make chowder from Dima's ide and Andrei's perch. While its cooking, I'll show you some sambo-wrestling tricks and a cartwheel too."

Semyon undressed and stood there on the hot stones for a few seconds as the boys eyed him enviously. His strong, muscular body seemed bronze in the sun. His angular head and short neck were set stubbornly upon powerful shoulders that were nearly black from the sun. His face with its high cheekbones and high forehead were deeply tanned and topped by thick blond hair which the sun could not darken and which blazed in a wild yellow flame like a flag.

Semyon stood by the water's edge for a moment, bent his knees slightly, came up sharply, bringing his hands up and out as if some unseen force had raised him up ever so lightly, thrusting his body far into the cool depths of the stream. The others followed suit, all except Vitya, who sat

put in the scorching sun, poking a hole in the wet sand.

For the next few minutes the boys swam around laughing, shoving and raising rainbow splashes. Semyon was the first one out. He did not dress, but rummaged about in his trouser pockets for a cigarette. The water rolled off his chilled body in clear drops.

"What's the matter, Vitya? Is there any trouble at home?" he said, sitting down beside the boy.

"Leave me alone," Vitya said listlessly. He rose and walked away.

Semyon took several large strides, caught up with him and blocked his way.

"What do you want?" Vitya shouted in despair and thrust his head back to look up at Semyon. His hair needed cutting badly. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," Semyon put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Can I do anything?"

"No! No, you can't!" He shook off Semyon's heavy hand and started walking away, took several steps, stopped and said, "Last night that ... Makar Kaftanov came back last night. Understand?"

"Makar?" Semyon exclaimed. His eyes went to the road upon which the man with the walking stick had so recently passed on his way to Mikhailovka, a man whom he had taken from afar to be Uncle Ivan and who had been in prison for several years.

"Maybe they came back together," Vitya said, intercepting his gaze.

Semyon frowned. Makar Kaftanov was his mother's younger brother and the famous thief who specialized in robbing stores. He had been sentenced six times although he was only twenty-eight.

* * *

After breakfast Fyodor Savelyev walked through the cowshed, came out into the yard and bellowed, "Kirian!"

A second later the plank door of the Iniutins' shabby cottage flew open and Kirian Iniutin, who was still chewing on something, burst out of the house and appeared on the peeling, lopsided porch.



"Had your breakfast? We're going to the shop."

"But it's Sunday. I've just took a bottle down to cool in the cellar."

"What bottle? We start harvesting next week, and your tractor's a mess."

"Well ... Well, if we've got to, I guess we've got to. Be right with you."

The Iniutin cottage, put together from slim, crooked logs, seemed especially small, tumbledown and pathetic beside the large Savelyev home. Kirian Iniutin, narrow-shouldered and balding, looked just as pathetic and tumbledown beside the hulking mass of Fyodor Savelyev.

Kirian darted back into the black hole of the door. His wife Anfisa came up to the porch from the garden, carrying something in her apron. She had a sharp nose, bold, narrow eyes, firm breasts and a proud body, and looked like a girl even though she was thirty-nine.

She took no notice of Fyodor. Her shabby skirt was tucked up high, revealing cold, ruddy calves that were wet from the dew of the garden and splattered with mud.

"Had a good night's sleep?" Fyodor inquired.

"Oh!" she exclaimed and pulled down her skirt.

Fyodor went up to the fence between their houses. "Come over here."

Anfisa swayed indecisively and then came closer. "What is it?" Her eyes were lowered and her pink lids trembled.

"I'll be waiting for you as soon as it's dark. Back in the sunflowers. Mm?" Fyodor said as he touched the tip of his moustache and nodded in the direction of the patch of sunflowers beyond the garden. "Will you come?"

Anfisa's eyes scorched him. She took to examining the fresh little cucumbers in her apron.

"It's a shame I let Kirian have you," he said and smiled wryly. "Time just doesn't make you old. You look as young as ever. Now you take Anna, for instance."

"What's the use talking about that now?" Anfisa said and sighed.

"Well? Will you come?"

"All right, if Kirian doesn't wake up," she replied simply and, seeing that her husband was coming out of the

house, thrust a cucumber into Fyodor's large hand. "Here, try it."

"You sure have a green thumb."

"That's for sure," Kirian muttered. "When everybody's just started planting she has vegetables in the kitchen. What're you standing around for? Go on inside!" he added irritably and prodded her in the direction of the porch.

The two men walked along the street towards the machine and tractor station in silence..

After the end of the Civil War both Polikarp Kruzhilin, the former commander of the partisan detachment, and the chairman of the Volost Executive Committee proposed that Fyodor Savelyev be put in charge of the Shantara post office. Fyodor in turn took on Kirian Iniutin, a former soldier in his squadron, as his manager. They both stayed on the job there for nearly ten years, until 1931. In the beginning all went well, but after a while Kirian took to the bottle. He began selling post office property and supplies on the sly: now a roll of wire or a dozen telegraph poles, now a set of harnesses. Fyodor had often bellowed at him for this and shook his large, hairy fist in Kirian's face.

"What're you talking about, Fyodor?" Iniutin said, looking at him innocently and wiping the large drops of perspiration that appeared on his balding head. "May I drop dead on the spot! Why, I'd never dare sell government property. I'll bet it's the grooms' doing. They'll use the money for drink. Wait till I get my hands on them! They'll never steal a pin again."

Then Kirian took to prying open parcel post packages, and very skilfully at that, and extracting various items. The number of complaints pouring in increased. Eventually, Fyodor had to resign.

"You were a partisan! The brave leader of a squadron! And what a squadron! The best in the regiment! You've let the post office go to the dogs! You've no control over your staff. You've let me down. It's a disgrace!" Kruzhilin, who was by then Secretary of the District Party Committee, thundered.

After that Fyodor found a job as the Mikhailovka

Village representative of the recently-organized district branch of the State cattle purchasing office.

The first person he came upon in Mikhailovka was his younger brother Ivan, who looked as sun-bleached as if all the color had gone out of him from being cooped up in a cellar. Ivan was as thin as a rail. His sallow skin was so taut on his cheeks it seemed you could see the bones underneath.

"You? What're you doing here?" Fyodor demanded.

Ivan turned away. He glanced at Zvenigora looming in the distance, turning dark in the evening mist. There was a long whip tucked under his arm. "I'm the cattle office's shepherd."

"We'll fix that in no time. I haven't forgotten how to take care of bandits. How'd you get here, you little White-guard flunky?"

"Yakov Aleinikov'll tell you if there's any need to," Ivan said and walked off. The flapping edge of his weather-beaten canvas raincoat caught on the stiff stems of sage.

After the end of the Civil War Yakov Aleinikov, who had been in command of the scouts in Kruzhilin's partisan detachment, went to work for the GPU. When Fyodor told him why he had come to see him, Aleinikov rubbed the long scar on his cheek, left there by Colonel Zubov's sabre, and said, "Your brother was released from the Barnaul prison back in 1925. He's served his sentence."

"You mean he only got five years for being an enemy of the state?"

"The court knew what it was doing. There were extenuating circumstances. He stayed on in Barnaul for a couple of years after his release. He was a cooper there and a barge-cleaner in some creek. That's where he married a girl from one of the river boats. We know he moved here. The people on the Mikhailovka collective farm didn't want to let him join."

"And I'm not going to work with him, either. Is that clear?"

"Yes. If it were up to me, I'd have every last rat who had anything to do with the counter-revolutionaries shot. Just to be on the safe side and keep things peaceful in the country. But Kruzhilin says to leave him alone and let him

work. We're coddling our former enemies, but they'd sure take care of us quick enough." He paced up and down in his office and stopped by the window. His cold eyes beneath the shaggy brown brows bored through Fyodor. "What're you so mad at him about? After all, he's your brother."

"Don't you know? "

"All right," Aleinikov said and smiled. "That's your business. It's a family affair, so to speak." He rubbed his scar again and added, "But if we look at it from a proletarian, class point of view, I'd like you, if you notice anything underhanded, a whiff of anything, something said, to say nothing of any actions...."

"What? " Fyodor wanted to grab hold of Aleinikov's new leather straps that gleamed brightly in the sun pouring in through the window and shake him, but he did not dare. "I'm not going to spy on him. I'm telling you this straight off." And he left.

Aleinikov raised a shaggy brow and looked after him thoughtfully.

No matter how it irked Fyodor, he now found himself living next door to his hateful brother. They did not visit each other, nor were they on speaking terms, except for the rare occasions on which Ivan, having driven a herd of fattened cattle off to Shantara, would hand the receipts over to Fyodor on his return and say:

"Is that all? "

Fyodor would carefully examine the figures and signatures on the crumpled yellow slips of paper and mutter, without even deigning to glance at Ivan, "Yes."

The long-standing animosity between two brothers grew and became twisted into a tight, heavy knot, causing endless rumors and gossip among the villagers.

"Fyodor's itching to get his hands on that counter-revolutionary. Mark my word, he will some day."

"They're both like two peas in a pod. Don't you forget that Fyodor married a kulak's daughter."

"You're wrong there. Kaftanov was a mean devil. A real slave-driver. We had our fill of him. But Anna fought alongside of Fyodor with the partisans."

"Hah! What you mean is she was scratching her pussy

on Fyodor. You're right there."

"Talk was she was scratching it on Ivan, too."

"Those boys seemed to be drinking from the same cup."

Whenever Fyodor got wind of the gossip or caught someone's mocking or puzzled eyes on him he would turn deathly pale.

Thus, a year passed. One day Fyodor said, "Listen, get the hell out of here! Move away before it's too late! I'm telling you this for your own good."

"Why am I in your way now?" Ivan asked. He had recently grown a moustache as bushy and stiff as Fyodor's. It also drooped in the shape of a horseshoe, the only difference being that Fyodor's was black as coal and Ivan's was blond, in keeping with his pale gray eyes, the color of the hot July sky.

"Because don't like your moustache!" Fyodor rasped and hate streamed from his eyes.

"What's wrong with it? It's no different'n yours, except for the color."

Something lurched inside of Fyodor. He grabbed hold of Ivan's lapels and shook him as he seethed, "Are you making fun of me? Mocking me! Trying to knife me with your hints?" He brought his hands down with such force and in such a rage that the loud ripping sound jolted him back to his senses. He took a step back and stared at the two strips of cloth.

"You're batty," Ivan said calmly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Just then Ivan's wife Agata, a small, spry woman, came into the pen, where the brothers had clashed. She had been passing on some errand, but had stopped at the sound of their voices.

"You bitch, you! You lousy, filthy vermin!" she railed at Fyodor, rattling off the words as fast as a machine gun. "You want to do Ivan in, don't you? He's had more than his share, but you want to drive him to his grave, don't you? Tearing the only clothes he has. You're dressed good and fine, but all we have is rags. Take your jacket off this minute, you louse!"

Her eyes flashed as she pranced about Fyodor's tower-

ing frame. Her braids had fallen free from under her kerchief and swung back and forth. She shook her small fists at him and finally started yanking off his jacket. Fyodor backed away, fending her off as he would a frantic, yapping little dog. She finally managed to pull off his jacket, rolled it up, stuck it under her arm and dashed out.

"Don't worry, I'll give it back," Ivan said as he bent down to pick up his lapels.

He brought the jacket to the small office in a shed the next day and tossed it onto the rickety desk.

"I want to add something to what I said yesterday," Fyodor muttered, avoiding Ivan's eyes. "If I ever see you talking to my family, to Semyon ... and God help you if I ever catch you near Anna. No matter whether anyone's around or not. You'll have nobody to blame but yourself if I do."

"Sure. You're not Kirian Iniutin. No, sir."

Fyodor bounded up and around the desk. He barely restrained himself from clutching Ivan again.

"Go on, tear them off again," Ivan said, as if offering some advice. "See? Agata sewed them back on. But she can sew them on again."

"No, I won't," Fyodor grated. He seemed to be supressing the sound of his own voice. "I'll just kill you straight off if you ... start spreading rumors! "

"Get your hands off me! I don't like the hair on them," Ivan finally snapped.

For several moments the brothers stood there, killing each other with their looks. Fyodor was the first to retreat. He turned and circled back around the desk.

"Talking about rumors. The whole village's buzzing about you and Anfisa."

"Just you watch yourself, boy," Fyodor said listlessly and without any apparent animosity.

Fyodor got Kirian Iniutin and his family to move to Mikhailovka soon after he was established there, having made arrangements in the district center to have Kirian as his assistant. Fyodor's job wasn't all that difficult. In fact, there wasn't even enough work to keep one man busy. The Iniutins moved into the empty half of Fyodor's house. As Anna listened to them moving in and the sound of pots

and pans clattering came through the wall to her, she would begin to weep softly time and again.

"Quit it! " Fyodor shouted. "Quit your bawling! "

Two or three weeks later Vasilisa Poskonova, a sharp-tongued village woman, was returning from the fields when she came upon Fyodor and Anfisa in the bushes by the road beyond the village.

"Wait'll you hear this! " she babbled excitedly as she went from house to house, calling on the women that evening. "It's downright disgraceful! He was tickling her naked tits with his moustache, and she was laughing her head off. I said to myself: who's that laughing? I thought some of the kids were fooling around, so I went to have a look. I moved the bushes apart and—goodness gracious! "

On several occasions after that Fyodor and Anfisa were seen together: once in the woods, once in the fields, once on the bank of the Gromotukha.

"It's outrageous! " the village women fumed as they picked Anfisa's bones. "It's a wonder she's not ashamed to walk the streets! And her a mother! Vera's ten now. Before you know it, she'll be going out with the boys."

"I bet Kolya knows what's going on, too, even though he's just a kid."

"The likes of her should be strangled when they're born."

The one thing the village men could not understand was Kirian's attitude. He knew very well that his wife was having an affair with Fyodor. In fact, he had been told so to his face many a time. There were even volunteers who were ready to take him straight to the ravine in the wood or the steppe to catch the lovers at the scene of the crime. But Kirian would slice the air with his hooked nose, spit on the sun-scorched ground and say,

"What? My wife? Never in your life! She'd lay hands on herself before she'd ever...."

But the villagers knew that every so often Kirian would get roaring drunk, lead his wife off to some remote spot beyond the village and beat her frightfully, leaving black and blue marks all over her firm, white body. On such occasions Anfisa would lie in the bushes until nightfall and

than creep back to the village when she was sure no one would see her.

Ivan looked upon his brother and his doings in silence. He never said another word to him about Anfisa and forbade his wife to. "He'll kill me otherwise."

"What's Fyodor got against you? Why does he hate you like poison?"

"Probably because I was with Kaftanov's gang and because of Anna. He thinks Semyon's my son. I've told you all about it, about how it was. You know I don't have any secrets from you."

"What do you say we move away from here?" Agata said one evening after supper.

Ivan was silent for a long while. Their three-year-old son Volodya was playing in a corner with some much-fingered wooden spools.

"No, that's no way out," he finally said. "I was born here. My father and mother were both murdered by the Whiteguards here. My brother Anton was right when he wrote and said I've got to stay on here and work off my sins and have their graves pricking at my conscience all the rest of my life."

Agata knew that Anton, the elder of the three Savelyev brothers, had been living in Kharkov after the Civil War. He was an assistant shop foreman at the tractor plant there. She also remembered his letter to Ivan. They had received it long ago, when they had been living in Barnaul. It had been responsible for their having moved back to Mikhailovka, although she had tried her best to talk Ivan into staying on in the city.

"I want to write to Anton, but I can't seem to get around to it. I want to ask him to send me a snapshot of himself. Do you know, if I meet him in the street I won't recognize him? The last time I saw him was in 1910, I think. He'd just escaped from the Tomsk or Novonikolayevsk prison, and the gendarmes were hot on his trail. But you know that."

They couldn't fall asleep for a long time that night and lay in the dark, looking up at the ceiling.

"Do you still love her? Anna, I mean?"

A silent wave swept over Ivan, as if a swallowed sigh

had passed through his body. "She's caused me nothing but trouble all my life, damn her. If not for her, do you think I ever would have joined Kaftanov's gang?" He was silent for a while and then added, "Although, actually, it wasn't her fault."

He turned towards his wife and ran his rough hand over her hair and face. When he touched her cheek it was wet from her silent tears. "Now, now. If there was anything to that, do you think I'd have married you? And where would I be now if not for you? Go to sleep." He drew her close. Thus calmed, she fell asleep.

Bearing Fyodor's warning in mind, Ivan spent the next two years behind an invisible wall that he had erected between himself and Fyodor's family, Kirian Iniutin and Anfisa. If he bumped into any of them by chance he would pass without even glancing their way, and they repaid him in kind, all except Anfisa, whose stare would sometimes lash him before she lowered her eyes, as if she was embarrassed. On one occasion ten-year-old Semyon came up to where Ivan was sitting under a pine tree, watching the herd on the slope.

"Hey," Semyon said and stuck his grimy hands into his pockets. "They say you're my uncle."

Ivan did not immediately reply. "I am."

"Then why were you on the enemy's side?"

"Things just happened to turn out that way." Ivan smiled diffidently.

"You Whiteguard lecher!" the boy muttered and stalked off with his hands still in his pockets.

Although the wall between the brothers did not recede, Ivan in time came to be accepted by his fellow-villagers again. Less often now did he catch them looking at him with curiosity or disdain. Ever more frequently would the men greet him in passing, or even stop to chat and offer him a smoke of their coarse, strong, home-grown tobacco that crackled and gave off sparks.

Time, which makes one grow accustomed to anything, was probably responsible for this change. Besides, Agata, who was a very sociable woman, was also a help. In no time she had gotten to know all the village women and

often joined them, working along with them on the collective farm.

"Why are you killing yourself? You're working even harder than us and you're not even a member of the farm."

"I'll survive," she'd reply with a smile. "Ivan is out tending the herd, and I don't have much to do."

Then again, Ivan would help out on the farm every now and then. He would fix a harness, or a sleigh and was an expert at making runners, wagon rims, casks and barrels.

Pankrat Nazarov, the former deputy commander of the partisan detachment and now Chairman of the Red Grain Collective Farm, was forever asking him to do some odd job for the farm, and Ivan never once refused.

One rainy autumn evening Nazarov turned in at Ivan's tumbledown cottage. "Real bitchy weather we're having," he said, brushing the raindrops from his beard. He took out his tobacco pouch and sat down by the door. Rivulets ran down his raincoat and onto the unpainted floorboards. "I'm messing up the place."

"Never mind," Agata said and smiled. "It's no bother wipe up a puddle. Take off your coat and have a cup of tea."

"This is no time for tea parties," Pankrat said gloomily. "We're threshing the straw from last year's stacks again. Ah, what's the...."

That year, 1933, was a lean one, and the poor harvest held promise of a long and frightening winter ahead.

"How'll you manage? Do you have anything put away for the winter? "

"We've got potatoes, and maybe that'll pull us through," Ivan said.

"We won't die," Agata said and smiled broadly again, as if she had just had some good news.

"It's a sin to die with a wife like you," Pankrat said. Then he addressed Ivan. "Listen, how d'you feel about joining the collective farm? "

Ivan had been planing staves in a corner. He set down his plane and straightened up. Agata flew to her husband and flung her arms around his shoulder, as if some danger threatened him.

"Will you take me? " Ivan asked.

"A lot of families are leaving the farm," the chairman said by way of reply and rubbed his tired eyes. "They pile their junk on a wagon and drive off to town, because they think life's easier there. They think that's where the money is."

"We'll have a good harvest next year. I just know we will!" Agata said fervently.

"We should, I guess," Pankrat agreed and then added after a short pause, "There's something that I've never been able to figure out. Why'd you shoot Anna's father? You never did make it clear to anybody. Did you think shooting Kaftanov would wash away the sin of being a Whiteguard?"

"No. That's not why I did it." Ivan gently freed himself from his wife's embrace.

"Yakov Aleinikov has always said that's why you did it. And your brother, Fyodor, too."

"How the hell would they know? I never reported to them, either. I never explained that to anybody, not even when they questioned me before my trial, and I never will."

"Take it easy," Nazarov said, rising. "That's your business. The way I see it, you've been leading a clean life. And we need men like you on the farm. Yakov says, 'Don't you even think of letting him join the collective farm. That rat's just biding his time. He's got his tail between his legs now, but he's waiting for his chance, and see if he doesn't sink his teeth into your throat then.'"

"So that's it," Ivan smiled bitterly. "That sort of makes me like a wagon that's stuck in the bog outside the village."

"It used to be a bog, but we've filled it in with rocks, and it's dry ground now." Nazarov buttoned up his raincoat. "Things sometimes turn out like that in life, too, but I don't think Aleinikov takes that into consideration. Ah, to hell with him. You and Agata think it over, and we'll accept you next spring."

And they did. Ivan was afraid that the people at the farm meeting would start asking him questions about how he came to join Kaftanov's gang, and what had made him kill him, and perhaps someone would even recall Demian

Iniutin, the peg-legged former village elder, and perhaps someone would ask him who had killed Demian and why. Ivan had never told a soul except Agata about Demian. However, no one asked him any questions. Perhaps that was because, after calling the meeting to order, Pankrat Nazarov had gotten straight to the point by saying:

"Well then, Ivan Silantieievich. We all know you were a member of Kaftanov's gang. You served your sentence for that. The Soviet Government handed down your sentence and you served it. But if there's any other sins you didn't tell the court about...."

"Or any other killings," Yevsei Galanshin, a scrawny little man, added and looked at his fellow-villagers triumphantly.

"Anyway, Ivan, you'd better confess now, because if anything crops up later.... You know what I mean."

"I'm not holding back on anything. And I didn't kill anybody. I washed Kaftanov's foot-cloths and scooted around for homebrew for him, making sure to keep him supplied."

"Well? Wasn't that evil-doing?" Lusha Kashkarova suddenly shouted. She was a woman of close to fifty, who had not yet lost her youthful beauty and looked much younger than her age. "You stole three liters of homebrew from my house, you thief! I still remember the bottle. There was a piece chipped off the neck. And you raised your whip and said you'd whip me. I even remember the day. It was on St. Agraphena's Feast Day in 1918."

"Yes, I know. You were clutching that damn bottle as if I was cutting out your heart. If you want to know, Kaftanov was blind drunk and said I was to bring him the homebrew and you, too."

The murmur that had gone up immediately died down. Everyone pricked up his ears. One could actually sense the expectation in the air.

"Well?" someone in the back row finally said.

"I told him that she'd probably got wind of his intentions and had run off into the steppe."

"You did?" Galanshin jumped up from his seat and waved his hand. "That's the lie Lusha's never forgiven you!"

"Robbing a woman of such joy."

"She's still sorry."

Bursts of laughter filled the room.

Lusha looked this way and that, and a feeling of rage welled up within her. "You're all a bunch of studs! You've no shame! What am I supposed to be sorry about? Why, the minute Ivan told me Kaftanov had his eye on me I wrapped up a change of linen and headed for the woods. Ivan was there. He knows it's the truth. You tell them, Ivan! I didn't stop running till my heart nearly burst."

"That's right. You were running so fast nobody could catch up with you."

Galanshin interrupted them to say, "Do you think she might have been heading for the retreat out at Ognev Springs, by any chance, Ivan? Out of habit, like? "

"What retreat? Which springs? " Lusha shouted, but her voice was drowned by the roar of laughter that followed.

In her youth Lusha had been a saucy, easy girl. Perhaps that was why, despite her pretty face, no one had ever offered to marry her, although one and all had partaken of her favors. Kaftanov, the richest man in the vicinity, would go on a drinking bout every so often and would make no bones about taking Lusha off to his retreat for a couple of weeks.

In 1928 one of the village lotharios fathered her son. When she discovered she was pregnant she was honestly bewildered and, upon meeting one or another of the village women on the street, would glance angrily at her growing stomach and say, "I wonder who did it? If I ever find out, I'll kill him with my own two hands! Just wait till the baby comes! I'll see who it looks like and leave it on his father's doorstep."

When Vitya was born, however, no matter how closely she examined his face, she could not determine who's son he was.

The villagers at the meeting laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks. Lusha shouted, she turned this way and that, and tried to exonerate herself. Finally, she sat down and began to weep. "You've no shame, none of you! " she

shouted. "Go on, why don't you say there's something between Kaftanov's boy Makar and me? Don't think I don't know what you're saying behind my back. It's a wonder your tongues don't shrivel! "

The laughter died down quickly, for no one ever seen Lusha crying before. Besides, she had flaunted their own rumors and gossip at them.

It was difficult to say whether there was anything to the gossip. Yakov Aleinikov had apprehended Kaftanov's elder son, Zinovy, soon after the latter had taken over command of his deceased father's gang. Rumor had it that Zinovy had been sent to Novonikolayevsk, now renamed Novosibirsk, and had been shot there.

However, Kaftanov had another son, Makar. Makar had been six years old in 1919, and Kaftanov had kept him out of harm's way at one or another of his forest retreats. There was talk that Lusha had helped him out in this.

No one knew where Makar had disappeared to after the Civil War ended, nor whether he was even alive. However, in the summer of 1930 a tall, narrow-chested young man with coal-black hair arrived in Mikhailovka. He was dressed in a clean city suit, wore a felt hat and carried a walking stick. He spent the night in Lusha Kashkarova's house and when he appeared on the village streets the following morning all eyes were on the amazingly-dressed stranger.

"And who may you be? " Yevsei Galanshin ventured, being bolder than the rest.

"I'm Makar. Makar Kaftanov. I've come back to my native village."

"You don't say! " Yevsei drawled, and the tip of his flat nose wiggled. "What if they arrest you? On account of your father, I mean."

"Nah. I'm not interested in politics. I'm a criminal."

"A what? "

"A thief."

"A wh-who? " Yevsei stuttered, moved his scrawny neck uncomfortably and stopped breathing.

"Don't worry, pappy," Makar said reassuringly as he tapped his cane on Galanshin's shoulder. "I only rob stores. That's my speciality. You don't keep a store by any chance, do you? "

Men and women, attracted by the unusual conversation, grew bolder and drew closer. Yevsei giggled nervously. He circled around Makar.

"We've seen all kinds of jokers. But you'll get slapped into jail for robbing a store much quicker'n for anything else."

"Don't scare me. And they've got to nab you at it first, you know. Now listen: Lusha Kashkarova's like a mother to me. I'm going to buy her a house in Shantara and move her there. And until I do, I don't want anyone to touch a single hair on her head."

At this, he left Mikhailovka. About two weeks later word reached the village that a store had been broken into in Shantara and that Makar Kaftanov had done it. Lusha's eyes were redrimmed from crying, but she would not answer any questions.

Makar turned up in Mikhailovka twice after that. Now everyone knew that he really was a thief and that he had often been arrested but had never spent more than six months or a year behind bars, as he miraculously managed to be released each time.

On both occasions he spent several days at Lusha's house and then said he was going to Shantara to buy her a house. Before he was able to do so, however, he apparently landed in jail.

Now, at the time Ivan Savelyev was being accepted as a member of the collective farm, Makar's fourth visit was expected, although something seemed to have detained him.

Lusha sobbed loudly and wiped her wet cheeks with a corner of her bright kerchief. As before, no one said a word. At last, Galanshin spoke up.

"There's no sense getting all worked up about gossip. Like they say, where there's smoke there's got to be at least a burning coal."

Someone giggled but shut up quickly. A murmur rose again, and there was a stir in the audience. However, Pankrat Nazarov put an end to the noise and talk by hollering.

"That's enough! Quit the babbling. Let's get down to business. Does anyone have anything to say against Ivan except Lusha here? "

There were no objections.

Two or three days later Yakov Aleinikov came flying into Mikhailovka in a light carriage. He pulled the prancing brown stallion up outside the farm office, tossed the reins to Ivan, who was just coming out of the chairman's office, and dashed up the flimsy porch steps.

No one knew what Aleinikov and Pankrat Nazarov talked about. When they came out of the office they both looked as ruffled as two sparrows after a fight. Nazarov did not even look in Ivan's direction as he stamped off. Aleinikov, however, accepted the reins from Ivan's hands and said.

"I like the way you've wormed your way in here."

"I never did."

"I think that's something you'd better leave for us to decide." He fell back in the carriage and drove off.

That very evening Ivan saw Pankrat by the barns and went over to him. "What did Yakov want? Did he come here on account of me?"

"To hell with him. He's got to keep an eye on everyone. That's his job."

His words calmed Ivan and Agata, who was also worried by Aleinikov's sudden visit. That night she took Ivan's hand and pressed it against her stomach. All he felt was the soft warmth of her body, but he guessed the meaning of what she had done.

"When'll it be?" He stroked her chilled shoulder.

"Early in November, I think."

"Good for you. See? Joy, like sorrow, never comes singly."

Ivan was arrested that June when the haying began.

It was a hot day. Skylarks trilled overhead. That morning the farmers had begun mowing the grass on the meadow near the Gromotukha. After swinging their long scythes for hours, they lay down in the shade after dinner and breathed in the warm, sweet air of wilting grass. Ivan watched the sun wring the moisture out of the mown stacks, he gazed at the warm, shimmering air and smiled to himself as his thoughts focussed contentedly on Agata, who lay on her back beside him. Her legs, scratched by last year's stubble, were crossed tightly at the ankles, and she had covered her face with her faded kerchief. He thought

of the child she was carrying under her heart and hoped it would be a girl.

A gig clattered on the road that snaked down the slope to the meadow. Ivan turned his head at the sound, but Agata jumped up and shielded her eyes as she gazed towards the road. Then her hands went to her swelling breasts in terror.

"What's the matter?" Ivan rose, too.

"I don't know. My heart's beating so hard."

The gig drew up. Yakov Aleinikov, so covered with dust that even his shaggy brows were pale, jumped down. He was followed by a middle-aged militiaman.

"Hello, everybody!" he said to the men and women, all of whom had by now risen. Then he added, turning to Ivan, "All right, come on. You've wormed your way in, but we'll worm you out sure enough."

Agata cried out. Her face became ashen. She moved over in front of her husband, as if to shield him from Aleinikov.

"Move aside, woman!"

"Will you put him in jail?" Vassilisa Paskonova asked in a frightened voice. She was the one who had first spread the word about Fyodor Savelyev and Anfisa Iniutina sleeping around together. "What's the charge?"

"That's right, comrade-citizen. Why don't you tell us?" Petrovan Golovlyov, a stocky man in his fifties, said solemnly and then ran his fingers through his shaggy beard, parting it in two.

"Move aside!" Aleinikov shouted, but the circle was not broken. The villagers stood around in silence, staring at him expectantly.

"We want to know what happened," Maxim Nazarov said and came forward. He was the chairman's twenty-three-year-old son and was as tall as his father, and had his father's powerful, jutting jaw. Maxim had joined the army at nineteen and had come home on leave a week before. A lieutenant's insignia adorned his army shirt. He, too, had been mowing since morning and had fallen asleep exhaustedly right after dinner, with his head resting on a pile of mown grass. His eyes were puffy and the grass stems had become imprinted on his cheek.

"It's a criminal case," Aleinikov conceded at last.

"Maybe even a political one. The court will decide."

"But what did Ivan do?" Yevsei Galanshin squawked angrily, looking around for support.

"Yes! What did he do?"

"Can't you even tell us?"

"Maybe.... Maybe Ivan didn't tell us about his past doings?" Galanshin shouted again, for he was a man of changing moods. "Maybe it's all come to the surface now? Remember, Pankrat warned us?"

"All right, men, I guess my brother Fyodor must have done me a favor. I mean about those two horses. But I'm sure the court'll set things right."

"Which horses?" Yevsei demanded, spinning around to face Aleinikov. "The ones that got lost last spring? The office horses?"

"Yes," Ivan said and turned back to his weeping wife.

Two of the office horses which Fyodor had ridden on his business trips had gotten lost a few days after Ivan had left the cattle purchasing office.

"So you're going to be a collective farmer now?" Fyodor had said and snorted when Ivan had handed in his resignation.

"What's the matter? Do you have something against that, too?"

"What's it to me? If they've taken you on, that's their business."

Then the ill-fated horses got lost. The evening before Kirian Iniutin had taken them out to graze on the meadow for the night and had hobbled them as usual. Caring for the two horses was probably Iniutin's sole responsibility. The next morning he went for them, but they had vanished into thin air.

"Well, well," Fyodor had said later that morning, coming upon Ivan on the street. "You didn't dare pull any tricks while you were getting your pay from the purchasing office, but now that you're not with us any more you think you can get away with murder?"

"What're you talking about?" Suddenly, the terrible meaning of Fyodor's words sank in. "Why, you... You don't know what you're talking about! Couldn't you think of anything smarter to say?"

"We'll soon see what's what, sonny boy," Fyodor had muttered and sauntered off.

Now Yakov Aleinikov had come to Mikhailovka.

Ivan stroked Agata's heaving back in silence. Finally, he said, "Come on, now. What's the use of crying for nothing? They've got to prove it first. I'll be back soon." And he got into the gig.

Aleinikov followed. The militiaman, who was driving, picked up the reins.

"Wait a minute." It was Arkady Molchanov, known as Molchun, the Silent One, a fat, awkward young man. He moved aside the branches of a bush and got up from where he had been lying on the ground.

There was no one in the village more eccentric than he. In all of his thirty years he had not spoken more than a few hundred words. There were years when no one heard him utter a single word. He never shied away from people, although he usually sat or stood off to a side, listening to what the others were saying, glancing at them with interest from under the thick mop of hair that covered his forehead. However, he was as silent as a crag, and no expression of any kind touched his handsome, almond-eyed face.

"What's the matter, are you deaf and dumb?" someone would occasionally say.

Arkady usually did not reply. But once in a while he would actually answer, "Why? No."

"Well, why don't you say something then?"

"What about?" And that would suffice for another year or two.

Arkady was a hard worker. He was mild-mannered, good-hearted and phenominally strong. He could toss a two-bushel sack of wheat onto a wagon with one hand. By grabbing hold of its horns he could throw the farm's biggest bull to the ground. For some strange reason the horses always sensed this great strength of his and whenever he appeared they would sit back on their haunches and their ears would twitch nervously, although he had never been mean or cruel to man or beast.

He and his deaf old mother lived in a large, bright house which he had recently built all by himself. He did all the housework and would never reply to the men's sugges-

tion that he get married. Once, however, he did say, "They're scared of me. Whenever I put my arm around a girl she crunches. I guess girls are made of glass."

Indeed, the girls were all afraid of him, although, knowing he was harmless, they crowded around and eyed him curiously.

Now, at the sound of his voice, everyone stopped talking. Arkady sauntered past his fellow-villagers and took a seat in the gig beside Ivan.

"So. Want me to give you a lift? How far do you want to go?" Aleinikov said, took off his cap and mopped his brow.

"To the militia station," Molchanov replied and spat on the grass.

"Sure enough. What do you want to confess to?"

"That night the horses got lost, I was on my way to the Gromotukha at dawn. I went to check my net. My ma's sick, and she wanted some chowder," Arkady spoke unhurriedly. Then he fell silent.

Everyone waited patiently for him to continue, but it seemed as though he had no intention of doing so.

"Is that all? I've no time to fool around. Get the hell out!"

"On my way there I saw Kirian going for the horses with the reins. Iniutin, that is. It was still night and dark, but he was catching the horses. He straddled one and had the other by the bridle. And then he galloped off."

"So what?" Aleinikov said irritably.

"What're you shouting at me for?" Molchanov said and turned away in a huff.

"Don't rush him, Aleinikov. Let him have his say."

"It sure is a miracle, Arkady Molchun talking!" Yevsei Galanshin cackled. "Go on, boy. Let's have the rest of it. So you say Kirian galloped off. Where to?"

"To Zvenigora!" Molchanov practically shouted the words. No one had expected him to be so angry. "I checked my net and was on my way back. There was Kirian, coming down the hill. He was walking, and he was alone. And he was carrying the reins. I could hear the buckles jingling."

"Where'd he take the horses?" Petrovan Golovlyov asked.

"That's what I wanted to know. Kirian went on back to the village. He didn't notice me. So I climbed the hill and looked down the other side. There was a gypsy camp down there. You could see the campfires in the dark."

For several minutes after the villagers stood around in silence. Ivan sat beside Molchanov, staring down at his feet and seemingly unaware of what the ever-silent Arkady had just said. Petrovan was the first to speak.

"Look here, men. You know what that means."

"It means he sold the gypsies those horses. How about that? "

"Listen to me! " Agata cried, making her way through the crowd. "Ivan's not to blame! As God's my witness! He could never do such a thing! "

"Be still, Agata."

"We've got to get to the bottom of this."

"Damn you, Molchun! Why didn't you say anything about it up till now? "

Everyone began talking and shouting.

"Quiet, everybody! " Aleinikov roared and waved his cap. Then he turned to Molchanov. "So you want to bear witness? All right, come along."

The sleek horse pulled the gig across the meadow to the road. Agata followed it for a few steps. Then her swelling body faltered and she sank down to the grass. Her shoulders began to heave. The villagers stood around helplessly, and all of them felt somehow guilty. As before, skylarks trilled in the clear blue sky, sending their joyous song down to earth.

Arkady Molchanov returned the following evening. He took off his dusty jacket, washed up and attacked a cold plate of summer soup hungrily. His mother kept ladling more into his bowl.

"How'd things go? Did they settle it yet? " Maxim Nazarov, the chairman's son, stopped by to ask.

"They're studying the case."

Maxim couldn't get another word out of him.

After that Molchanov was summoned for questioning several more times. On each occasion a horse and gig was sent for him, and each time he returned home from the district center on foot. He would not answer his neighbors'

eager questions, and after each successive trip he seemed to become more and more troubled.

Kirian Iniutin was also summoned for questioning several times, and Fyodor Savelyev was called in once. Each time Kirian returned drunk. Like Molchanov, he would not reply to any questions, but would grimace and repeat each time,

"I hope he drops dead. And your dear Arkady, too. You can't shit on an honest man, just like a bird can't shit on a graveyard cross."

All Fyodor said when he got back was, "I wouldn't wish a brother like him to my worst enemy."

In August 1935 Ivan was sentenced to six years imprisonment. Fyodor greeted the news in silence, although his face twitched nervously. Kirian Iniutin got drunk and beat up his wife that evening.

"You dumb ass! Why'd you say you saw Kirian taking them horses off to the gypsies?" some of the villagers said to Molchanov. "They'd never jail an honest man."

"I bet he dreamed it and then couldn't wait to tell us his dream."

"You can all go...." Molchanov said, cursing foully for the first time in his life. He would not speak to anyone after that.

That very evening Pankrat Nazarov went to Ivan's cottage. He sat by the open door, chain-smoking and rubbing the stubble on his chin. The stubble crackled beneath his horny fingers, as if hot flames were licking it. Agata sat by the window as if she had turned to stone and stared blankly at the shimmering darkness outside.

"I don't believe Ivan would ever do a sneaky thing like that," Pankrat said and sighed noisily. "But then again, a man just isn't thrown into jail for nothing." He smoked another cigarette and rose. "I'll tell you this, woman. Let's leave Ivan alone for now. You're a person, too. There's no sense getting mad at your neighbors. If you turn away from us now, you'll be lost. For the time being, we'll put Ivan in one bracket and you and your children in another. That's for the time being. Everything'll clear up in time. That's for sure."

Fyodor Savelyev and Kirian Iniutin stayed on in

Mikhailovka until the following summer when they both resigned from their jobs and moved to Shantara.

There seemed to be no change in the villagers' attitude towards Kirian and Fyodor after Ivan's arrest and trial. No one had been especially friendly towards them before, and no one thought of becoming friends with them now.

However, with each passing day Fyodor became more and more aware of the chill of estrangement. On meeting him in the street, people would turn their heads in embarrassment. Then, having passed him, they would turn and stare. Fyodor felt their hostile eyes on his back and would cringe inwardly.

Anna seemed to feel as uneasy as he did. Her large gray eyes that had once been phathomless were becoming ever more shallow and as empty as the late September steppe. She was tall and well-built, and despite having borne three children, had retained the light gait of her girlhood. Now she seemed suddenly to wilt and grow heavy. When she was alone she would often sit by the window with her small, hot hands lying wearily on her lap and gaze out at the blue cliffs of Zvenigora, and slowly seem to become petrified as she sat there, lost in thought. Then she would start visibly, her chest would heave, and something alive and wild would begin to beat its wings inside her breast. She would place her hands on her chest and gradually quieten down. Then she would again stare dully and unblinkingly out the window.

Fyodor would often come upon her thus but never said a word, although he would sometimes wince. She would sigh, rise and take out the bone comb that held her hair in place. Then her honey-blond hair would fall to her waist in cold waves. Anna would comb it, wind it into a large bun on the nape of her neck and, throwing off her reverie, would go back to her chores.

They moved away from Mikhailovka unexpectedly.

One hot noon eight-year-old Dima came in from the street, had a glass of cold milk, picked his nose thoughtfully and said, "Why do they say Pa stuck that man, Uncle Ivan, in jail, Ma? "

Fyodor had been on his way in. He froze on the doorstep. Then he trudged over to a stool, sank down on it and

sat there in a dark mood for some while. Finally, he sprang to his feet and kicked away the stool. "That's enough! They're sticking knives in me with their eyes, as if I really did pack Ivan off."

He left for Shantara within the hour, to return three days later, riding up to the house in a wagon pulled by two horses and bringing a new representative for the purchasing office. An hour later their simple belongings were piled on the wagon. Fyodor helped Anna and Andrei up, handed the reins to Semyon and said,

"I'll catch up with you." He stopped and asked Pankrat Nazarov, who had just come up to him, for a light.

"So you're leaving? What'll you do there? "

"I'll be at the machine and tractor station. I'm taking a course in mechanics."

"Oho. That's pretty good. There's probably going to be a lot of machinery around soon." Pankrat was silent for a while and then said frankly, "You're doing a wise thing by leaving."

"So that's it? "

Yevsei Galanshin was hurrying on some errand, but he stopped to say with undisguised sarcasm, "How'll you manage without Kirian, Fyodor? Or will you send for him soon's you get there? "

Fyodor seemed unruffled, although his sweaty neck became crimson and his creased cheeks sagged. "That's however as will suit me." He smiled icily, and his eyes bore holes through Yevsei.

Kirian Iniutin moved his family to Shantara the following week. Two weeks later Vasilisa Paskonova, the village gossip, went to the Sunday market in Shantara and brought back the news that Iniutin had enrolled in the same courses Fyodor had spoken of.

"The both of them have notebooks tucked under their arms and they share a bench studying at them courses," she prattled.

"What about Anfisa? What about her? " the women all wanted to know.

"How d'you expect me to find out in just a day? " Vasilisa said, fending them off. "I'd know for sure if I'd stayed on for a few days."

The villagers shook their heads in wonder at this great friendship between Fyodor and Kirian.

* * *

Anton Savelyev arrived in Peremyshl late in the evening of June 21st.

The sooty little engine that chugged breathlessly on every incline barely managed to pull the half-dozen creaking wooden cars and had to make long stops at every siding to catch its breath. At every stop the train would be attacked by rosy-cheeked women vendors wearing bright aprons. They called out their wares: steaming cottage cheese dumplings, mushrooms stewed in sour cream, and fried chicken!

Anton had moved to Lvov from Kharkov right after the Western Ukraine had been liberated. At that time the Kharkov tractor plant had sent a group of mechanics to the liberated areas. In his heart of hearts Anton did not want to move from his familiar surroundings, but he did not say a word of this to anyone except the plant's Party Secretary.

"What'll I do there? There's no tractor plant in Lvov yet."

"There'll be enough work. You'll be assigned to the Party Committee," the Secretary said.

At the Lvov Regional Party Committee Anton was offered the job of shop foreman in the future large machine-building plant, and while it was still under construction he was asked to be one of the construction managers. Now he was in Peremyshl to expedite a shipment of bricks for the future plant from the local brick factory.

It was a still, warm evening. However, a strong smell of gasoline wafted across the San River, bringing to mind the latest disquieting talks in the Regional Committee which he visited nearly every day in connection with various construction matters.

The talk revolved around the suspiciously large German motorized and infantry formations that were being concentrated across the river. Opinions varied. Some

said the Germans had merely withdrawn troops that had been stationed in France, but Anton shared the anxiety of his comrades in Lvov. There was good reason for it. German planes kept crossing the border ever more often. Sometimes they circled leisurely over Lvov. Spies from Bandera's counter-revolutionary gangs were apprehended in the city and the outlying villages. Anton had recently brought one such bandit to the NKVD.

He had been crossing the future factory yard on his lunch hour when he overheard the following conversation. It was coming from the direction of a wooden shack.

"May I drop dead on the spot if the Soviet regime doesn't fold up soon. So you're breaking your backs for nothing here, boys. And you can be sure we'll help it fold up good and tight."

Anton rounded the corner and saw a group of bricklayers eating their lunch.

"Who's going to fold up the Soviet regime here? "

The bricklayers rose reluctantly. At that moment Anton realized that he had acted imprudently, for the shed shielded them from view, and there was no one else in sight.

"I am, if it's anything to you," a tall, lanky man in a lime-spattered jacket said and his eyes darted around furtively.

"Who are you? What's your name? " There was no backing out now.

"Want my pass, or will you take my word for it? " The man opened his jacket, revealing the black tattoo on his chest. It was a trident, the Bandera emblem.

There was not a moment to lose. Anton's fist connected with the man's unshaven chin.

"Don't stand there! Kill 'im! " the man yelled and pulled out a knife.

Anton bent swiftly and picked up half a brick, all he could see in that split-second. However, he would not need the weapon, for the other four men piled on the bandit and pinned back his arms.

As Anton walked along the quiet, tree-lined streets of the town towards the hotel he was thinking about all that had happened. He decided to go back to the construction

site early the next morning, for they worked on Sundays, too. He would shave now and have supper.

Although it was getting late, he found a barbershop that was still open. The barbers had their own method of shaving here. A barber would first lather one man's face, then a second and a third man's face, and then only would he pick up his razor and go back to the first client.

However, there were no other clients, and so Anton got a shave quickly. The barber was a gray-haired old Jew. He manipulated the razor so swiftly it was amazing he didn't cut a man's face.

"Hear anything about what's going on across the river?" Anton asked.

"How can I know what's going on there?" the barber replied, speaking with a heavy Jewish accent. "Or do you think I cross the border to have my dinner?" However, when he had finished shaving Anton he added, "They say that a tank unit is stationed right across the San. What do you think the German tanks want here?"

"I don't know," Anton sighed.

"Yes. That's how it is," the barber said and also sighed. "But it can't be. The Soviet Union and Germany signed a non-aggression pact."

Then Anton went to the small, cozy hotel snack bar. Here, as in Lvov, one could have tiny petit-fours and canapes, although the coffee was a far cry from the coffee you got in Lvov.

Anton tossed and turned on the bed in his hotel room but could not fall asleep. He was wondering how Liza was and whether Yura had arrived and was uneasy. His only son Yura, who was now a lathe operator at the Kharkov tractor plant, was supposed to arrive that morning to spend his vacation in Lvov.

Sleep finally overcame Anton. The last sounds his mind registered was of someone beyond the thin wooden partition crooning a popular Lvov ditty:

Repairs are full swing now in Lvov everywhere,
Fair maidens are having new frocks made....

He was awakened by a great crashing and thunder of explosions.

Anton stood up on the bed in a daze. For a moment he could not recall where he was and could not understand what was happening. Splashes of light danced on the wall, a reflection of something burning nearby. In another instant there was another explosion, this time right under his window. Flying bits of iron hit the wall behind him and a column of fire and smoke blocked out the window.

He pulled on his trousers, grabbed his jacket and dashed out. "Is this war?" The thought flashed through his mind and turned his insides to ice. Sleepy-eyed, half-dressed people were running out of their rooms and down the corridor, shouting excitedly. A woman was wailing in one of the rooms, and a child was screaming.

No sooner had Anton reached the street than the small, two-story hotel shuddered. The brick wall next to him suddenly swayed and crumbled. He escaped in the nick of time. From the opposite side of the street he watched the tile roof tilt and then come crashing down between the remaining walls.

Then only did the words pound clearly and painfully inside his head: "It's war! War! "

It was nearly light. The air was filled with the thunder of explosions and of bursting shells. "They're shooting point-blank from across the river," he said to himself and wanted to run to the railroad station. "Where's the woman who was wailing? Did she manage to get out in time? I've got to help her."

But this was a subconscious desire, because the very next moment he realized there was no one to help. A smoking pile of brick and tile was all that remained of the hotel. He pulled on his jacket and ran towards the main street where he had wandered in search of a barbershop the previous evening.

People were running out of the houses, throwing suitcases, pillows and clothing out of the windows, tying them hastily into bundles and running, shouting and screaming, falling, stumbling over abandoned suitcases and household junk. The cursing, moaning, weeping, explosions and thunder all blended into one long, terrible howl and further increased the panic.

Finally, the maddened crowd carried Anton to the

central square. It spread through the square and began draining off into the streets that led away from it. Anton stopped to get his bearings. Once again the thoughts that had pierced his brain earlier that night gripped him. How was Liza in Lvov? Had Yura arrived there yet?

A small green armored car drove down a side street, made its way through the crowd and stopped in the middle of the square. A man in uniform climbed onto the roof and raised a megaphone to his lips.

"Don't panic, comrades! This may only be a provocation. Just in case, we want you to retreat along the Drogobych Highway, because the railroad station and the tracks have been blown up. An evacuation point has been set up in the woods to the south of Sambor. There will be trucks to take you out."

The crowd of people carrying bundles, sacks and suitcases poured back into the street which it had just traversed to the square. The artillery barrage suddenly stopped, and the thunder of explosions ended.

That was when they heard the droning overhead.

Columns of red and black smoke rose over the city. The sun was rising, appearing every now and then through the smoke as a huge, swollen mass. Beyond the smoke and heading into the sun were the planes. They were flying low and three abreast. The ugly black crosses on their wings were clearly visible.

* * *

It was a scorching June day. The wooden roof of the Shantara fire-tower seemed lopsided. It creaked in the blistering heat as if it were about to burst into flame.

Vera Iniutina, a plump twenty-year-old girl with freckles sprinkled sparsely over her cheeks had been typing Kruzhilin's report to the coming District Party meeting despite the fact that this was a Sunday. Kruzhilin was also at his desk. Through the open door of her office Vera could hear him cranking the telephone endlessly and shouting hoarsely into the receiver, "Hello? Hello? Is this the exchange? Katya! Is that you, Katya? How about

Novosibirsk? No answer? What about the regional Secretary's house? No answer either? Where's everybody? Keep ringing the Regional Committee every fifteen minutes."

Vera had been working at the district office for two years, but she did not like her job. She would clench her teeth as she banged away hatefully on the clattering old Underwood, sentences that reported with military brevity just how much manure had been carted out to the collective farm fields in the winter or the spring and how many hectares had been weeded. Every now and then Kruzhilin would walk over to her, pick up a few more typed pages and go back to his office.

"Ah, Yakov Nikolaevich!" he suddenly said as he picked up another page. "You want to see me? Come on in."

"I will," Aleinikov replied from where he stood in the doorway of Vera's tiny office. "I'll be right in."

Kruzhilin glanced at him in surprise and headed back to his office. Yakov, meanwhile, crossed the little room and sat down on the windowsill. He was dressed in a brand new civilian linen suit and his white shirt made the old blue scar on his cheek seem brighter still. A tiny red vein throbbed across the scar.

Vera was afraid of this silent, ever-frowning man whose eyes, nearly concealed by his large, shaggy brows, always sent a chill into her heart. She had acquired this feeling of fear of him in her childhood. Whenever her mother had tried to get her bouncing brother Kolya into bed she used to scold him and say,

"My God! What a child! You just wait! I'll call Yakov Aleinikov, the one with the scar on his face, and he'll see to you."

But Aleinikov never came to their house. However, Vera remembered the time he had come to Manya Ogorodnikova's house in the small hours of the night.

That had been long ago, a year after her family had moved to Shantara from Mikhailovka. Vera and Manya were practically the same age. They became friends and

spent their days running wild in the steppe, and playing hide-and-seek in the Gromotushka bushes which began right by the Ogorodnikov's cottage at the edge of Shantara.

One evening she and Manya had sat up late reading an interesting book by the light of a kerosene lamp. When they were through it was so dark Vera was afraid to go home alone and so stayed over.

Her sound sleep was disturbed by a motor turning over outside the window. Then there was a knock and voices. When she finally came fully awake she saw Yakov Aleinikov standing by the lamp. He had on a long, heavy greatcoat and a cap with a visor buckled under his chin with a shiny leather strap. Three men she had never seen before and wearing the same uniform greatcoats stood by the door. Manya's father, a middle-aged man with a large, bushy red beard, was pulling on his boots with trembling hands. Aleinikov was smoking patiently.

Yerofei Ogorodnikov was Manya's stepfather. He had adopted her when she had been three years old. He was a shoemaker at the local trades enterprise. He and Manya lived alone, for he had no wife.

Vera recalled him pulling on his boots that night and then straightening up to ask,

"What's the charge? "

"You'll find out when we get there," Aleinikov had replied listlessly as he ground his butt out on the floor with his square-tipped boot. "You thought you could hide behind a beard and change your name and we'd never find you, didn't you? But we did."

"Goodbye, Manya," Yerofei had said, turning to his adopted daughter. "You're getting to be a big girl, so it won't be too hard on you. If you find a good man, marry him. You'll make out. After all, you have a roof over your head." He had spoken calmly and simply, as if he had been going off to work and would be back at the end of the day. However, there had been an unnatural brightness about his eyes.

Aleinikov sat on the windowsill, looking out at the street and the hens scratching in the dust in the front

garden of the District Committee, where the trees cast striped shadows and also farther off, near the hitching post, in the clumps of straw strewn about there.

The large wooden house with the sheet iron roof across the street had a solid wooden fence on all four sides. That was where the Secretary of the District Committee lived.

At last he rose without having uttered a word and left the room. Vera forgot all about her typing. She sat there for a long time after, pressing her hand to her breast to contain her pounding heart. "Why'd he come in here? What for?" The thought gave her no peace.

* * *

"Yes," Kruzhilin said, raising his large head which had been gray these many years as Aleinikov entered.

However, as Yakov had done in the typist's office but a few moments before, he now sat down on the windowsill and stared out at the street in sullen silence.

"Hello, Katya? Well? Hasn't Novosibirsk answered yet?" Kruzhilin said and cranked the phone again. "You'd think everybody was dead or something."

"It's Sunday, you know. One fellow's gone fishing, another's out drinking. It's people like us who are always on the job."

Kruzhilin replaced the receiver, glanced up at Aleinikov and then lowered his eyes to the papers spread out on his desk. "Have you come on business?" he said, still scanning the papers.

"Can't I just drop in? After all, we are friends."

A dull, heavy feeling of irritation spread through Kruzhilin's body. It was a physical sensation that even made his hands become heavy as they lay on his desk.

"You say we're friends?" Kruzhilin, unlike Vera, was not afraid of Aleinikov. In fact, he was afraid of no one or nothing in the world, not even death, which had taken his measure many a time.

He realized the necessity and importance to the revolution of the job Yakov Aleinikov was doing, a job that was often difficult, perhaps sometimes dirty, and always dan-

gerous. What he could not understand was Yakov and the change that had come over him.

After the Whiteguard Kolchak Army had been defeated, Kruzhilin had taken Aleinikov on as Secretary of the Volost Executive Committee, of which he was Chairman. However, they were not fated to work together for long, because in the spring of 1920 a new gang of bandits had appeared in the environs of Shantara. This was a short while after Kaftanov's band had been destroyed. The bandits would raid a village and murder every former member of Kruzhilin's partisan detachment, killing off their families as well, showing no mercy for their wives or children, and then setting fire to their houses.

"I know that style. It's Zinovy, Kaftanov's son," Aleinikov had insisted. "Let me go after him, Polikarp Matveich. I'll bring that one-eyed rat in within a month." As he had spoken his eyes had smoldered impatiently and his shaggy brows had twitched nervously.

In the end, Kruzhilin had talked the matter over with the chief of the Shantara Cheka, a sluggish, helpless man who was obviously not suited for the job. It was decided that Aleinikov would be entrusted with organizing a special detachment made up of Cheka men and former partisans to liquidate the gang.

True enough, although this had not been within the month but late in the fall of that year, Yakov had prodded a wall-eyed man of about thirty-five into Kruzhilin's office.

"Here he is, just like I said. Stand up straight when you're facing Soviet power, you son-of-a-bitch! "

It really had been Zinovy Kaftanov, Mikhail Kaftanov's elder son.

After that Kruzhilin had recommended that Yakov Aleinikov replace the helpless chief of the Cheka. He had not been mistaken, for Yakov had taken to the job like a fish to water. In no time he had swept all sorts of bandits out of the Zvenigora gorges and Gromotukha forest, bringing law and order to the region. Kruzhilin had been sorry to see Aleinikov transferred to Barnaul soon after

and was pleased when he had later returned to Shantara.

"Pitch in, Yakov," he had said. "These are troubled times. The kulaks didn't give us any trouble during the NEP, but now they're beginning to raise their heads again."

Those had been tense times at the beginning of the campaign for establishing collective farms. By then Kruzhilin had become Secretary of the District Party Committee.

Yakov Aleinikov had a sixth sense as far as the kulaks were concerned and always managed to unmask their plots and nab the ringleaders. He was on the go day and night, lost weight and looked haggard but was always cheerful, good-natured and open-hearted.

"You're having a tough time, aren't you, Yakov?" Kruzhilin had once said. "All that's left of you besides skin and bones are your eyebrows and that scar."

"We'll manage," Aleinikov had replied, revealing two rows of fine teeth as he smiled. "I'm going to Bely Yar tomorrow. My boys have been keeping an eye on two of the collective farmers there. They've been having strange night visitors. Something fishy's going on."

"You're right. Just before the sowing fifteen horses died on that farm. They say they were grazing on bad grass."

"We'll clear it up. I'll be in touch with you. I'll let you know if anything comes up and we can talk it over."

Indeed, he had always consulted Kruzhilin and had kept the Party Committee informed of all his actions.

But then a change had come over Aleinikov. He became less talkative, more introverted and often showed up at the District Committee unshaven and sullen. Kruzhilin had not noticed the exact moment this change had begun. At first, he had thought that Yakov was simply exhausted from the hardships of the job, that he was getting older, and that the strain and tension were becoming too much for him. His visits to the District Committee had become few and far between.

"What you need is a good rest, Yakov. What do you say? How about going to some spa?" Kruzhilin had said one day.

"We'll rest up all right ... in our graves, if we slacken the reins now," Aleinikov had muttered in reply.

Aleinikov had then adopted a new working style. In tracking down some hidden enemy of the State, Yakov would begin by creating a vacuum around him. Then, when the person he was hunting down was caught in his net, as he invariably was, Aleinikov would conduct a thorough investigation, releasing the innocent persons who had been arrested along with the guilty one.

"I don't like the way you're conducting these cases, Aleinikov," Kruzhilin had said when he had learned of what was going on. "You've no legal right to arrest innocent people. You're not running a tsarist security service here."

Kruzhilin was later to pay for what he had said, although in a rather strange way. During one of his business trips to Novosibirsk in the middle of 1936 he was asked to come to the Territorial Department of the NKVD and was detained there for nearly three days and three nights. He spent the nights sleeping on a worn leather couch in one of the offices. In the daytime a young investigator named Tishchenko would come to talk to him, going over time and again such data as his place of birth, his parents' names and occupations, how he had spent his youth, where he had fought during the Civil War, who his comrades-in-arms had been, etc.

At about 2 p.m. on the third day the door opened and Yakov Aleinikov entered or, rather, burst into the room.

"Polikarp Matveyevich! This is crazy! I just found out that they've been keeping you here. 'Why,' I said, 'You've all gone mad! How could you even doubt Kruzhilin? We've been looking for our District Committee Secretary.' Come on, I'm going home from here, too."

"I don't think it's very funny, Aleinikov," Kruzhilin said softly, enunciating each word.

Yakov had stopped short, raised and then lowered his brows. Muscles in his cheeks twitched, drawing the taut skin tighter still over his cheekbones.

"Polikarp Matveyevich," he replied in a hollow voice, staring unblinkingly into Kruzhilin's eyes. "We do not touch people who are faithful to the Party and the Soviet

regime. On the contrary, we protect them. This incident can be easily explained." His voice now became official. "Some time ago I mentioned as a joke the way you criticized my working style, saying that I wasn't running a tsarist security service here. They apparently took note of what you said."

"Don't lie, Aleinikov! I'm not a child! "

"Polikarp Matveyevich! "

"What? What you're doing in the district is against the law! "

"For instance? " Aleinikov's eyes became narrow slits. White spots had appeared and begun to spread over his face.

"For instance, take Ivan Savelyev. He's innocent. For instance, take Arkady Molchanov, who's also from Mikhailovka. Why'd you arrest him right after you arrested Savelyev? "

Kruzhilin clenched and unclenched his fists in a furious rage. Shudders passed over his large body. He tried to contain them but could not.

"Anything else? " Aleinikov said, smiling with his lips alone.

"Yes! This can't go on! We planned to hear a report on the work of the district NKVD at our next bureau meeting and to discuss the situation. There would probably have been a recommendation to relieve you of your post for infringing upon Socialist law. But instead you decided to keep me here for a few days and frighten me. I want you to know that nothing will come of it! We'll hold the bureau meeting anyway! We won't let you escape the control of the Party."

Aleinikov stood there in silence for a few moments. Then he went over to a small table, poured himself a glass of water and drank it. When he spoke his voice was calm. "I see there are some things you don't understand, Polikarp Matveyevich. There won't be any bureau meeting."

"Why not? On what basis? "

"On a political one. Here's a pass to let you out."

Kruzhilin rushed out in a rage and stalked off towards the Territorial Party Committee.

Subbotin, Secretary of the Territorial Committee, an

aging, angular man whose cheeks were deeply lined, did not see him immediately, but when he did he listened to what Kruzhilin said intently and without interrupting. Then Subbotin said,

"Yes, I know. They've phoned me. This is a very unpleasant business."

"Do you mean.... Does that mean I really don't understand what's going on, as Aleinikov said, Ivan Mikhailovich?"

"It seems like it."

"But what is it that I don't understand?"

"Hm," the Secretary mused. "Quite a bit. The political situation. The signs of the times."

"What?" Kruzhilin raised his eyes and stared at Subbotin as if he had never seen him before.

Kruzhilin had known Subbotin since 1919, when Ivan Mikhailovich had been one of the leaders of the Novonikolayevsk underground revolutionary organization and, later, a commissar in one of the regiments of the legendary 5th Red Army. They had first met late in November 1919, when Kruzhilin's partisan detachment and Subbotin's regiment had joined forces to drive the Whiteguards out of Shantara. The regiment had then gone on to Novonikolayevsk. Subbotin had shook his hand firmly in parting and had said, "Well, Polikarp, you'll be establishing Soviet power here now. You're done fighting for now."

Kruzhilin next met him about two or three years later at the Barnaul Party conference. "Now I've done my fighting," Subbotin said, recognizing Kruzhilin and shaking his hand firmly again. "There's a big job awaiting us at the Uyezd Party Committee. We'll be working together now."

And they did, meeting often until 1930 when Shantara became a part of the newly-established West Siberian Territory. Kruzhilin lost track of Subbotin for several years after that. Then, six months ago, they had met at the West Siberian Territorial Committee. "Ah, Polikarp Matveyevich!" Subbotin had exclaimed. "Old friends will always meet. Fate had thrown us together again! Come on into my office, and tell me about life in Shantara."

It was a pleasure to work with Ivan Mikhailovich Subbotin. He was soft-spoken and friendly and never lost

his temper or got excited. None of this was in harmony with his angular and rather plain appearance, but the overall impression he made was one of an extremely interesting and just man. At first, Kruzhilin did not know what made one succumb to the charm of this man. In time he realized that it was his eyes, his gaze. When Ivan Mikhailovich spoke to anyone his unblinking gray eyes took in the person rather sadly so that it seemed they had penetrated to one's very soul, discovering that which others would never see. Strangely, this neither insulted nor alerted the person he was conversing with. At any rate, Kruzhilin had never felt so. It simply made it impossible for him to hold anything back. It made him bare his soul, giving voice to the good and the bad alike. In some strange, unexplainable way Ivan Mikhailovich's eyes made him feel that here was a man who would understand, who would not reproach him for not understanding something of importance, and who would help him understand that which he had not.

Subbotin was now looking at Kruzhilin in such a manner. Silence descended upon the large, clean office with a worn carpet on the floor. The brass pendulum of the wall clock dropped each second lazily and clearly upon the wooden floor, and the light-blue curtain moved in the breeze.

"But if I don't understand such things," Kruzhilin said, listening to the ticking of the clock, "how can I go on ... being the District Committee Secretary?"

"That's just what I've been wondering about," Ivan Mikhailovich said tonelessly. Kruzhilin started and raised his head slowly. Subbotin sighed and rose. "All right, Polikarp, go on back home."

Kruzhilin's head was ringing when he left the building. He had a strange feeling that someone had been chewing on him long and hard, had not swallowed him for some reason or other and, instead, had spat him out into the dust of the road, all creased and chewed.

He downed a glass of tepid vodka at a scratched stand at the station and boarded his train, feeling nothing but nausea and disgust.

"What's the matter?" he kept thinking as the wheels clattered. "All right, say I don't understand. Then why

didn't Ivan Mikhailovich explain what it is I don't understand? He at least could have done that."

Back in the district, Kruzhilin plunged into work, travelling from one village to the next, on the go from dawn to dusk. It was the peak of the haying season. Polikarp Matveyevich would sometimes strip off his shirt, take up a pitchfork and, as the sweat poured off him, swing the heavy, fragrant piles of hay for days on end.

He had been working thus one day at the Mikhailovka collective farm, stacking hay on the meadow by the Gromotukha. In the evening he bathed in the cool river, sat down on a broad rock which had become cold and listened to the Gromotukha rolling over the stones. He heard a gig rumble up, stop, and someone approach.

"Had a hard day? "

Kruzhilin recognized the voice. It was Pankrat Nazarov, Chairman of the Mikhailovka farm.

"When you're feeling good, a good day's work makes your blood run faster, Pankrat."

"Yes," his former partisan deputy agreed, sat down beside him and cupped his broad chin. "But sometimes it doesn't turn out that way."

Kruzhilin cocked an eye at Pankrat, who looked like a crag in the gloom, but said nothing.

"Remember the time we were running away from Zubov and waded across here? "

"Yes. This is the place."

They were silent for a long while after, for each was lost in his own thoughts.

"What about Ivan Savelyev? Hear anything? "

"I don't know. What could I hear? "

"Yes. Yes," Pankrat repeated. "But you know he's innocent. He shouldn't be serving time now." And perhaps because Kruzhilin did not respond, he said, "How could that have happened? Why didn't you do anything? After all, you're the District Secretary."

What could Kruzhilin say? Finally, he said, "If I try to explain you won't believe me ... if I say the District Committee Secretary is sometimes helpless and can't do anything."

The river rumbled. In the west the last shreds of cloud

turned dark, as though the dark water spreading over the sky was consuming them like clumps of snow. The night promised to be black and sultry and, somehow, it seemed that it would never end.

"Well," Nazarov said with a sigh and stuck his hand into his pocket for his tobacco pouch, "live and learn. And it's true. His brother Fyodor packed him off to jail. But why? What for? What do you think? "

"Why ask me, Pankrat? I don't know." Then, thinking more of Aleinikov than Fyodor Savelyev, he added, "You take the Gromotukha. It's noisy in the summer and still in the winter. You can understand that. But sometimes it's hard to understand the changes in people. You're right when you said live and learn."

They rose and walked over to the gig together.

"Well, goodbye, Pankrat. I'll go harness Brown Falcon."

"Oh, yes. There's something else. I was thinking of making Agata a team leader."

"Why? Aren't there any men left on the farm? "

"Sure, there are. But sometimes one woman is worth a dozen men." He waited for Kruzhilin's reply.

"Don't," Kruzhilin spoke softly in the darkness.

Nazarov sighed. "Then how about transferring her to the dairy farm? "

"No, don't do that, either. Don't do anything, Pankrat, for the time being. Just let things be."

"All right. I guess you're right. That's probably the best way out for now."

Despite what had happened in Novosibirsk and his talk with the Secretary of the Territorial Committee, Kruzhilin intended to hear report on the work of the district NKVD and then discuss it at the bureau meeting. However, for the first week or two after his return he could not collect his thoughts. His trips to the outlying villages of the district calmed him somewhat, so that when he returned to Shantara he told his staff at the District Committee to prepare the report.

The very next morning Aleinikov phoned him. "Listen, some of your people are down here, and they want me to give them some sort of data."

"Those aren't my people, they're on the staff of the District Party Committee."

"Well...." Aleinikov paused for a moment and then said, "I'm not going to give them any data."

"If that's the case, I think we'll have to discuss the behavior of Yakov Aleinikov, Communist Party member."

There was silence. All Polikarp Matveyevich heard was Aleinikov breathing loudly on the other end of the wire.

Finally, his voice, even, low and frightening in its studied slowness and clarity, continued. "I'm very much afraid, Polikarp Matveyevich, that we might have to discuss another Communist at the bureau meeting. Namely, Polikarp Kruzhilin. And I wouldn't like to do that at all." Aleinikov hung up.

Polikarp Matveyevich paced up and down angrily. When he had cooled off somewhat he phoned Aleinikov again, but a woman's bland voice replied that Yakov Nikolayevich was away on business and was not expected back for some time.

"How long will that be? "

"I don't know."

Kruzhilin then phoned the Territorial Committee, but Ivan Mikhailovich was out. Nor was he in the next day or the one after. On the fourth day Subbotin phoned him himself.

After greeting Kruzhilin he asked about his health and how he was getting along, and this immediately alerted Polikarp Matveyevich.

"What are you getting at, Ivan Mikhailovich? Let me have it straight."

"It's like this, Polikarp. We've decided to transfer you to Oirotiya. The national cadres there are inexperienced and need help."

"So. I see."

"What do you see? " the Territorial Secretary said sharply. "Don't twist this around. It's Party assignment."

"And where exactly will I be going? To which *aimak*? That's what the districts in Oirotiya are called, aren't they? "

"You'll be assigned to the Oirot-Tura Regional Committee. They'll decide where you'll be most useful."

Kruzhilin became Deputy Chairman of the District Executive Committee in one of the most remote districts of the Oirot Region and remained in this post until the beginning of 1941. He had lost both Subbotin and Aleinikov from view for Oirotiya had become a part of the Altai Territory, a new administrative division established that year.

Polikarp Matveyevich had accepted his lot and was certain that he would never again see either of the two men. However, in January of 1941 he was suddenly summoned to Barnaul and told that at the request of the Novosibirsk Regional Party Committee the Altai Territorial Committee had found it possible to relieve him of his duties forthwith and transfer him to Novosibirsk.

"It's Ivan Mikhailovich's doing! " he guessed.

Two weeks later Kruzhilin was again elected to the post of Party Secretary of Shantara District.

"But isn't Aleinikov still there? " Kruzhilin asked Ivan Mikhailovich as he was preparing to leave for the district Party conference.

"Yes."

"But, as far as I understand, Aleinikov was responsible...."

"Time marches on," Ivan Mikhailovich interrupted. It was obvious that he did not want to discuss the matter. "I hope you're both smarter and will work well together now."

Polikarp Matveyevich did not completely understand what Subbotin meant. Indeed, a lot of time had passed, and those had been hard years. The widely publicized 1936, 1937 and 1938 trials of the members of the Trotsky-Bukharin bloc had made Kruzhilin look upon many things differently than he had before. This included Aleinikov's activity as well. The enemies of the Soviet regime had apparently really raised their heads towards the end of the second decade of its existence.

Time and again factories had been blown up, and the Cheka had discovered and unmasked plots and groups of saboteurs. Well then, perhaps Ivan Savelyev and that inconspicuous collective farmer named Molchanov whom Aleinikov had arrested were also guilty in some way? Perhaps

Savelyev actually had sold those two accursed horses to a band of gypsies and then Molchanov had decided to cover up for him? Some men assassinated Party leaders and statesmen, while others sabotaged in other ways, each doing what he could. But Pankrat Nazarov and the other collective farmers at Mikhailovka did not believe that Savelyev was guilty and had spoken up in his favor. Did that mean they were against the Soviet regime, too?

It was impossible to get to the heart of the matter and to the truth, and this had made his head spin.

However, the thing that remained the hardest to understand and, consequently, was the most terrible as far as Kruzhilin was concerned, was the fact that way back in 1936 Yakov Aleinikov had prevented the District Party Committee from reviewing the work of the district Cheka and had cut short the District Committee's very first attempt to do so.

These thoughts lay as a heavy weight upon his heart. He had no one to talk it over with, no one to go to for advice.

After Kruzhilin's transfer to Oirotiya the Shantara District Committee acquired a new First Secretary. His name was Pyotr Petrovich Polipov, formerly of the staff of the Novosibirsk Regional Committee, a short, stocky, silent man. He seemed constructed along broad planes: he had broad shoulders, a broad forehead and high cheekbones. Even his nose was broad and had flaring nostrils. Upon being introduced to Kruzhilin, he seemed quite disinterested as he raised his puffy lids and his large, cold eyes took the former in. Kruzhilin, however, asked himself whether Polipov was not a hard drinker.

Yakov Aleinikov also greeted Kruzhilin with reserve, expressing neither pleasure nor irritation at seeing him. Aleinikov had aged visibly in these few years. His hair, which he still slicked back, had thinned out and a future bald spot was clearly visible. His shaggy brows, too, seemed to have thinned out, and the large scar on his cheek had become purple. "What the devil! Has he taken to drink, too?" Kruzhilin wondered.

Yes, Yakov Aleinikov had changed and so had a lot of other things in the district. Strangers now headed all the

district organizations. Kruzhilin knew that some of the people he had worked with before his transfer to Oirotiya had been arrested. Vasily Zasukhin, the permanent quartermaster of the former partisan detachment and then Chairman of the district Consumers' Coop, had been arrested. During the Civil War, when the detachment had been encircled and it seemed they would all die of starvation, Zasukhin managed time and again to miraculously come up with food. His men would either arrive with half a dozen skinny sheep in tow or carrying several sacks of flour. Danilo Koshkin, head of the District Financial Department, had also been arrested. In everyday life he had been a quiet, inconspicuous young man, but when they went into battle a drastic change would come over him. His eyes would blaze as he threw himself into the heart of a battle. That was how he got to be nicknamed Dan the Battering-Ram. Kornei Baulin, the former chief of staff of the partisan detachment and later Chairman of the District Executive Committee, had also been arrested. He did not know what the charge against them had been, nor where they were now, and could ask no one. It was useless to even ask. Kruzhilin would never know if Aleinikov, who now sat on the windowsill in his office, glumly silent, did not tell him himself or did not at least hint at it.

There was a dead silence in the room. The longest day in the year was sizzling outside as Aleinikov gazed at it through the window. The leaves on the young poplars in the front garden had been scorched by the heat and hung there like limp black rags. Heavy blue-white clumps of cloud were suspended in the murky, oppressive sky above the poplars and threatened to come crashing down upon the earth.

"There's going to be a storm," Aleinikov said.

"I have to prepare a report for a meeting, Yakov Nikolayevich, so if what you've come to see me about isn't urgent...."

"Urgent." Aleinikov smiled wryly. "All of a person's business is urgent, since his life is so short."

These words, coming from Aleinikov, sounded very strange.

"Ivan Savelyev was released today," he suddenly of-

ferred. "He's probably walking up to his house this very minute."

"So what? "

"Nothing. He's served his term. He can live in peace now." He was silent again and then turned his head slowly to face Kruzhilin. "Go on, why don't you say he was innocent and shouldn't have been sentenced in the first place? "

Kruzhilin narrowed his eyes and stared at Aleinikov. "What's the matter, Yakov? Are you trying to provoke me again? "

Aleinikov started as if he had been hit. He got off the windowsill and pulled up a chair beside Kruzhilin. "I didn't think you were going to bring it up. Don't Polikarp. It's all very complicated."

"What is? "

"Everything. The fact that Kornei Baulin, Koshkin and Zasukhin were arrested, and the fact that you're back here again, and Secretary of the Party Committee again." Aleinikov was talking with his head buried in his hands. Kruzhilin's amazement grew.

"Back in 1936, if you hadn't left then, I would have probably ... got you. If not for Subbotin sending you off to that hole. And then Oirotiya was taken out of our jurisdiction and came under the jurisdiction of Barnaul. Yes, Subbotin's a wise man. He's the one who saved you."

"Wait a minute, Yakov," Kruzhilin said, moving aside the papers on his desk. "If that's the case, let's start from the beginning."

"No, let's not. Neither from the beginning, nor any other way," Aleinikov said sullenly and rose.

Vera entered, bringing in the last of the typescript of his report. She placed the sheets of paper on his desk. "Will there be anything else today? "

"No. Go on home."

"How do you like working with Polipov? " Aleinikov said after Vera had left. After Kruzhilin's return Polipov had been elected Chairman of the District Executive Committee.

"It's hard to draw any conclusions after just a couple of months of working together," Kruzhilin replied and

shrugged. "At first, I thought he was offended at having to do just administrative work, but I think he's simply the silent kind."

"Yes, probably," Aleinikov said vaguely. "I think I'll be going." He headed towards the door, pushed it open, stopped and rubbed his temple. "There's something I wanted to ask you. Oh, yes, about the girl. What's her name?"

"You mean Vera Iniutina?"

"Yes. Is she a good typist?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind if I ask you to lend her to me? I need a good typist."

"Go ahead. If she agrees."

"Never mind. I'll find someone else," he suddenly concluded. "Goodbye."

Kruzhilin sat looking at the door for quite some time after Aleinikov was gone, trying to put his thoughts in order. Something was happening to Aleinikov again. But what was it?

Kruzhilin knew that back in 1936 Yakov's adopted son had died.

He and some other boys had been swimming in the Gromotukha and had climbed onto the ferry. When the ferry reached the middle of the river the boys dived in and made for the bank. Aleinikov's boy had dived, too, but had not even gone under. His body had bobbed on the surface like a heavy float, staining the water a bright red.

Logs were floated down the Gromotukha during the spring floods. Often these sap-filled logs which were as heavy as rocks would sink. However, the current would drag them slowly downstream all the same. Getting caught on snags or rocks, they revolved slowly below the surface. Many were the times that these heavy logs would ram through the bottom of a ferry as easily as if it were a paper boat.

Aleinikov's boy had hit his head against one of these submerged logs.

Half a year later Yakov's wife had left him. Kruzhilin hardly knew her. She was a tall, attractive and proud woman, but was also, he thought, intelligent and kind-

hearted. When they met infrequently on the street she had always smiled pleasantly as she greeted him, but had always hurried by, carrying her small bobbed head regally. Her name was Galina Fedoseyevna and she was a doctor on the staff of the district hospital. That was where Kruzhilin's wife worked. She had told him that Galina Fedoseyevna was a good doctor but was not liked by the staff and was avoided, apparently on account of her husband.

Yakov had brought her from Novosibirsk in the winter of 1934. She had been married before and had an eight-year-old son. Yakov, who had no children of his own, seemed genuinely attached to the boy.

Polikarp Matveyevich paced up and down his office, ran his hands through his gray hair and thought about Aleinikov and Subbotin, who had suddenly appeared to him in a different light that day. It seemed that Ivan Mikhailovich had shielded him by having transferred him to that remote region, and so he had not been arrested.

Kruzhilin had never spared himself, had never thought of sparing himself when he had fought for the establishment of Soviet power, truly the power of the people. He had later devoted all his energy to strengthening this power. But then it so turned out that he, even he, had suddenly to be protected and shielded from someone for some reason or other.

If that was the case, if Subbotin had understood all this as far back as 1936, why hadn't he come out frankly and openly, as one Communist to another, and told him what was going on in the country? Then a certain question would have certainly arisen: why did the Communist Kruzhilin have to be protected from the Communist Aleinikov? And what if such a question had arisen? Then Subbotin, Secretary of the Territorial Party Committee, would have had to reply if he were able (and he seemed to have been able to then!). He should have. He had to. It was his duty to have done so, because of his post; because he was older than Kruzhilin; because he had been a Party member for so much longer. But he had not told him. He had not replied. Why not?

Kruzhilin kept pacing up and down, and never noticed that it had gotten dark. He was brought back to reality

when thunder crashed directly overhead and rumbled off towards Zvenigora.

"All this thinking won't tell me whom the Regional Committee is sending to the meeting as its representative," he said to himself and cranked the telephone again.

"Hello, Katya? Well, child? Anybody answer? "

But Novosibirsk was as silent as before.

* * *

When Vera Iniutina hurried out of the District Committee building she looked at the overcast sky and hastened towards the Gromotukha's tributary that flowed beyond the village.

The first clap of thunder sounded as she passed the high voltage line. A torn, ash-gray sheet of rain was flapping behind her over Shantara. She took off her shoes and began to run, but the wall of rain was fast advancing. Soon the first sparse drops fell as heavily as bullets, thudding into the dust all around her, spattering her back and neck.

"Hey! Where are you? " she shouted, looking up and down the deserted bank.

Semyon darted out of the ravine and waved. A blinding flash of lightning ripped across the sky in hundreds of jagged streaks and went out. It became dark. In the darkness it thundered again rather softly, and then, with a great roar, the downpour began in earnest.

Semyon was shouting as he scrambled up the slope. He ran up to her, got his arm around her roughly, half-carried her down the slippery slope and under an overhanging, grassy ledge.

"How could you be out in the open in a storm? "

"The lightning might have cracked your skull to pieces," Kolya said and giggled.

"Shut up! " Vera snapped at her brother. She glanced at Dima and Andrei sternly as they stood huddled against the earthen wall. Tugging at her wet dress and pulling it away from her body, she also flattened herself against the wall, with her shoulder touching Semyon's.

The river bubbled like milk as the streams of rain churned the water.

They stood there thus for quite some time. Through her wet dress Vera felt Semyon's hot body and it made her slightly giddy.

Finally, the rain ended. Dima, Andrei and Kolya ran down to the water and raised their rods.

The sun appeared for its rays now came through the loose, exhausted lumps of cloud, tossing them every which way. Once again the river glittered and gleamed. The pebbles on the bank dried so quickly they steamed.

"Do you want me to make you a fishing rod?" Semyon said to Vera. "I have an extra line." He suddenly put his arm around her and drew her close.

"What're you doing? The boys'll see us." She spoke angrily and then walked off along the bank, heading upstream.

"Vera! "

She did not reply but entered the water unexpectedly and crossed the river towards the island. It was not deep there, for the water only reached to her waist, but she carried her shoes high over her head.

Semyon sat down on the warm stones, lit a cigarette and watched her. She reached the island, climbed up onto the sandy bar, took off her dress, wrung it out, hung it to dry on a bush and stretched out on the sand. Her sun-tanned body was barely discernable on the russet sand.

Semyon did not know whether he was in love with her or not. They had grown up together, had seen each other every day of their lives and were even in the same class at school. When they had been little Semyon had often pummelled her, because Vera was forever poking her freckled nose into things that were of no concern to her and was forever ferreting out the boys' secrets. She took her punishment stolidly and never tattled. This made Semyon respect her, and he always felt ashamed of himself later for having hit her. Vera seemed to sense this and would walk up to him boldly and say, trying to catch his eye,

"Never mind. You think I'm like that? Well, I'm not."

However, this only served to initiate him, for he would become angry at her for guessing how he felt and for saying that she was not like that, but like something else.

"Doesn't she have any pride?" he would say to himself. This would also make him think that she was very cunning.

When Vera's breasts began to grow he suddenly became embarrassed and tried to avoid her round, sparrow eyes. Once again, she knew how just he felt. If she caught him glancing at her unintentionally she would blush violently and shout,

"What are you looking at? Shame on you!"

"She's cunning," he would say to himself although, as before, he did not know what there was that was so crafty about her or whether she was actually cunning enough.

In two years' time Vera had turned into a pretty, fragile girl. Her legs became shapely and slim, her bloodless lips filled out and turned pink, her button eyes became doe-shaped and no longer resembled a sparrow's eyes. All that remained of the former child were the freckles around her nose, and even they had thinned out.

"You know, Vera, if your freckles suddenly disappeared, I'd miss them," Semyon said one day to his own surprise. It was spring, and he and Vera would soon graduate. Their final exams were to begin three days hence. The graduating class had decided to go to the water meadows across the Gromotukha for flowers and adorn their classroom for the coming examinations.

"What?" Vera had turned and said with a dazzling smile. Her arms were full of flowers. "Silly." Her chin was dusted with flower pollen.

As they crossed back to the village on the ferry Semyon stood by the rail, gazing at the murky spring water. What he saw there were Vera's gleaming eyes and pollen-covered chin.

"Listen, Semyon," she whispered in his ear. "Let's sneak off to the movies."

"What about the exams? We've got to study."

"Don't worry. We'll pass them," she whispered in the same secretive voice.

Semyon had never taken a girl to the movies before. He entered the community center building as if it were torture chamber. He felt that every eye was on him, and that there was surprise and reproach in each one.

"Silly," Vera said as she had earlier in the day and

nudged him. "What's the matter? Don't pay any attention."

They walked home in silence. There was still a narrow strip of pink in the sky beyond Shantara but it was fast melting away, going out like a burning match. Large white star-flakes twinkled and swayed overhead.

They reached Vera's house and stopped by the gate. Semyon had to say goodnight but didn't know how.

"I thought you'd die of fright at the movies," Vera said.

This made him furious. "Who, me? " He grabbed her shoulder and she leaned against him willingly. His knees came up against her soft thighs and his lips brushed her cheek. "Now what? " he wondered. Not knowing what to do, he stood there with his arms around her. Vera had no intention of moving away.

Semyon had often heard his friends boasting about their conquests and technique and decided that this was just the time to feel her breast. So that was what he did. He could feel her heart beating rapidly under his palm.

"Not so fast, Semyon," she said evenly and removed his hand. The way she said it, in an even, everyday kind of voice, and the fact that she had not brushed it away, but had simply picked up his hand and moved it aside, stung him to the quick and made it all seem somehow smutty. "You're not as bashful as I thought," she murmured, leaning against the fence. "At least, not when it's dark." She giggled. "Come on, let's walk a while." She did not wait for him to reply but took his hand and pulled him after her.

The unpleasant feeling he had just experienced towards her vanished and he wanted to put his arms around her again, but was afraid to disturb the quiet joy and contentment that had suddenly come over him. He was certain that Vera felt as he did.

"What are you going to do after we graduate? " she asked.

"I don't know. I'll be called up soon. Meanwhile, Dad said I should enroll in the courses at the machine and tractor station and learn to drive a tractor."

"That's not a bad idea. A tractor driver's always a

respected man. But there's nobody to tell me what to do. Maybe I'll be a book-keeper. Or a secretary. And this is the way you kiss, Semyon." She took his head between her hands and kissed him soundly.

The same unpleasant feeling washed over him again and he practically shoved her away.

"What's the matter? "

"Nothing. Where'd you learn to kiss like that? "

"So that's it! " Her eyes flashed in the darkness. Then she buried her head in his chest and said, "Oh, Semyon. It's just that I'm ... I see things more deeply than you do. But don't think anything bad about me. I've never been out with anyone. I'm saving myself for someone. Maybe for you. Do you love me, or something? "

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. See, I was the first. I took the first step. I know it. Maybe I shouldn't have. But I like you. I don't know whether it's love, though."

Her frankness disarmed him.

They had been going together for two years. Semyon was deferred, because there was a shortage of tractor drivers at the Shantara machine and tractor station.

"Maybe they won't take you altogether," Vera said hopefully.

One star-lit August night a year before, when they had been kissing for so long their lips hurt, Vera suddenly broke free, ran off a bit, sat down on the ground and burst into tears.

"Don't touch me! " she shouted when Semyon went over to her. Then, when she had calmed down a bit, she said, "You know, I think I love you. What about you? "

"I think I do, too. I always want to be with you."

Her sparkling eyes looked up at him quickly in the pale moonlight. Then she lowered them again. "Wanting to be with somebody doesn't necessarily mean you're in love. Your father and my mother also want to be..." she stopped in mid-sentence.

"Want to be what? What do you mean? "

"Nothing. Oh, Semyon! You'll be the death of me! " and she ran off into the steppe.

That night they wandered far beyond Shantara, lying on a forgotten rain-blackened haystack until dawn, watching shooting stars streak across the sky.

"Why will I be the death of you? "

"You're a decent person, Semyon. And you haven't once tried to have what you're not supposed to have till you're married. I'm glad you're like that, because I don't have to worry about being out alone with you. On the other hand, though, maybe being like this isn't so good after all."

"What do you mean? "

"It won't be much good if you turn out to be like this in life. A person who takes what he wants in life, who grabs what he wants, is the one who has a good life."

Semyon was lying on his back with his arms crossed under his head, gazing up at the pale, star-dotted sky and thinking about what she had just said.

On the far horizon the sky was turning blue, and there the stars had begun to blink more anxiously and more rapidly before going out and disappearing silently in the blue.

"Take my father. He's a dishrag. Everything he does goes wrong. All he knows how to do is drink. But your dad's not like that at all. Oh, no. I can see that."

"What? "

"Everything. He knows how to live. And he's going to be a bigger man than he is now. But what about you? " Vera bent over him. He could actually feel her eyes moving over his face. Her black pupils, invisible in the dark, left his forehead, cheeks and lips covered with something unpleasant, like cobwebs. "But what about you? Will you be like your dad? Help me to understand you, Semyon. Sometimes I think you're like him, and then again I think you're not, that you're more like my father."

He rose quickly and passed his hands over his face, as though it actually were covered with cobwebs. "For God's sake! I'm like this and not like that. What difference does it make? What are you so worried about? "

"Can't you understand? I'm a girl, a woman. I have to

get married. There's only one thing a girl has that's of any value before she's married. And she can't squander it on just anybody. Otherwise, who'll want me after that? Who wants somebody else's leftovers? "

"That's filthy! " he stalked off.

"Semyon, wait! " She caught up with him. "I'm sorry if I said something wrong. But I always say what I think. Now you know what I think, and it's up to you to choose. If you like me the way I am, then take me. You won't go wrong. I'll do anything for you. That's what I'm like."

"Leave me alone! " he shouted and brushed her hands off his shoulders.

"Go on, why don't you hit me? Go on, hit me! "

"You're damn right I will! You want to pick a husband like you'd buy a horse, looking to see what its teeth are like first! " and he slapped her face.

Vera swayed, hunched her shoulders and sobbed. She pulled off her kerchief and wiped her tears. Then she darted an angry, withering glance at him and walked away.

Semyon decided that he and Vera were through. However, a few days later he became conscious-stricken. If he was going to break up with her, he shouldn't have done it so roughly and meanly. After all, what had she said that was so terrible? Every girl wanted a husband who was not only good-looking, but a go-getter, as well. The only difference was that not every girl would come right out and say it like she had. What was so awful about that? Besides, she was pretty. Perhaps not everyone would say so, but he liked everything about her: her keen, almond eyes, her freckled nose, her tender, kissable lips, and her soft, silky skin.

That very day he was sent to Mikhailovka for the harvesting. "Well, this'll put an end to everything," he decided and even felt relieved.

But it did not. He returned to Shantara late that autumn. After bathing in the bath house he was walking along the garden path to the house when a shadow separated itself in the gloom from the fence that divided the Savelyev and Iniutin plots.

"You're a beast, Semyon. I've been going out of my

mind. My darling," Vera buried her face in his chest that was bare and damp in the V of his open collar.

It was so unexpected he was taken aback. "I'm sorry I hit you."

"Forget it! You should have smacked me harder."

Two stars danced in her eyes. Semyon looked away, fearful of meeting her compelling gaze. He was afraid of it now.

"What's the matter? Come on, look at me! I love you, Semyon. Can't understand?"

"I've been thinking about us a lot." He moved away from her. "You want your guts to rule your life, Vera. But your heart has to rule it."

"Silly! That's what you are!" She laughed happily. "You have to live all kinds of ways. Sometimes your guts have to tell you what to do and sometimes your heart. I don't like people who're only ruled by their hearts. If you want to know, I'm sorry for them."

"Why?"

"They're like bad eggs. The hen'll sit on them and sit on them, but nothing ever comes of it. They'll never hatch." She was silent for a while and then added, "You'd think they weren't even living in this world. They're useless people."

"Maybe she's right," he thought again.

And they picked up where they had left off.

After New Year's she began asking him outright when they'd get married. Semyon kidded and tried to wriggle out of answering. Vera's thin brows would twitch and her pink nostrils would flare.

One cold evening in March Semyon tended to the cow and their two sheep. After giving them some hay he went out to the yard and stood gazing at the sunset. The red-hot sky was smoking, and the very edge that touched the earth had melted and was flowing away in amber streaks. The huge, blood-red sun was sinking slowly into the liquid amber and seemed also to be melting away like butter in a hot pan. Its last rays still streamed over the earth, making the windows of the Iniutin house a fiery red. Breaking through the cold, creeping mist that heralded the night to come, it tinted the looming cliffs of Zvenigora a pale

yellow and hung upon the snow-covered hills. This made it seem as though the rocks were moving, as though the huge mountain were turning heavily in the shimmering mist of evening as if trying to find a comfortable position for the night.

Semyon stood leaning on his pitchfork, gazing at the magnificence of it all and smiling without realizing he was smiling.

He was brought back to reality by the creaking of the gate. Vera darted in and dragged him off to the hayloft without so much as a word. She pushed him back, fell on top of him and brought her cold lips down on his. Her kisses were like bites.

Semyon was sorry she had not let him watch the sun go down.

"You're crazy."

"I know I am." She pressed close to him and whispered plaintively, "Tell me, Semyon, when'll we get married? When?"

He sighed. "So you've chosen your husband?" Once again he recalled her kisses that were more like bites, and the feeling was unpleasant.

"Yes."

"You won't be sorry, will you?"

"No, never," she shook her head vigorously.

He stifled another sigh and sat up. Vera began to cry soundlessly.

"What's the matter now?"

"You'd think I was dragging you off to the slaughter. On the end of the rope," she said bitterly. "I'm afraid to look my parents in the eye any more. You know what my father said to my mother the other day? He said, 'What's going on between her and Semyon? Before you know it she'll be in trouble.' So you see, Semyon, it's either or. We either stay together or part."

There was a pause. Finally Semyon said, "All right. But this is no time to get married. Let's put it off till the fall."

"All right," Vera agreed and rubbed her wet eyes with her fists like a child. "That's what I'll say at home. And you tell your family."

It was no easy matter for Semyon to break the news at home. True, his mother would have understood. In fact, he felt that she already knew, that she had guessed, although she had never given any indication of knowing. His father was something else again. He knew his father disliked him, as he disliked his father. They had always been strangers. Semyon did not know the reason for this and had never tried to get to the bottom of it. As far back as he could remember his father had always rebuffed him. Not once had he ever caressed him, not once had he ever spoken to him kindly. He had always ignored him, quite as though Semyon did not exist. Semyon did not question this state of affairs but repaid him in kind.

One day Semyon, then still a child, sensed that his father did not love his mother, either, nor did he respect her. From that time on the chasm between them deepened and broadened with each passing year.

However, this was not what worried him. Vera did. Semyon knew she would be a good, devoted wife, but the calculating approach she had to people, and even love, frightened him.

And so, he did not say a word to his parents.

It would soon be fall. Vera had long since stopped asking him whether he loved her or not. She was simply waiting for the day. Semyon, however, did not stop asking himself this question, and as the time drew near he kept asking himself it more often. The more often he did, the more irritable he became. Strangely, though, he liked Vera as before. He liked her face, her eyes, her body, but no sooner would he think of the wedding than everything beyond this terrible dividing line became a black and frightening void. How could he explain this to her? And was there a need to? There was no turning back now. Besides, he did not think he wanted to.

The rain on the rocks had long since dried, and they had stopped steaming. They were hot now. The sun beat down as blindingly and mercilessly as before. Grasshoppers chirred monotonously nearby.

"What are you sitting there for, Semyon?" Kolya

shouted as he ran up and snatched the pail. "Look it the way they're biting! "

"Do me a favor, Nikolai," Semyon said. "I have to go someplace. You keep an eye on the boys."

Kolya's hooked nose bobbed up and down and he snickered. "Sure." Then he galloped off.

Semyon stood up and headed in the opposite direction. He stopped, took off his shirt and trousers and waded across the stream to the island.

No sooner had he entered the water than Vera, who had been sunbathing on the sandy spit, jumped up, pulled on her dress and disappeared in the bushes.

Semyon wandered about in the thickets, calling her name, but she did not respond. He was getting angry when she suddenly pounced upon him like a cat, toppled him onto the grass and began kissing him. Semyon rolled over on top of her, saw her wild, frightened eyes with the dancing yellow spots so very close and felt as though liquid fire was racing through his veins as his thoughts became engulfed by a hot, murky fog.

"Don't you dare! Don't you dare," Vera's voice came to him as from a great distance and sobered him immediately.

He let her go, sat up and fumbled for a cigarette. Vera crawled off into the bushes. She pulled the hem of her dress down lower on her naked legs. He could still see the yellow spots in her frightened eyes from where she stood in the gloom of the thicket.

"You can do it after we're married. As much as you like."

Semyon smiled wryly. "Maybe we shouldn't, Vera. What do you say? "

"Shouldn't what? " She looked at him anxiously.

"Shouldn't go through with it. I mean the wedding."

She jumped to her feet and stood up straight. "What's the matter? Don't you love me? Don't you like me? "

"It's not that."

"Well, what is it then? "

"I don't know. Maybe we should put it off. Hm? May be not this fall? "

Vera went over to him, sank to her knees beside him

and her dry, hot palms cupped his head. "What's the matter, Semyon? How can we put it off? What a thing to say! Look at me! Hear?" Then she pressed his head to her breast. "How can we live without each other?"

And then, as he had once long ago, he heard the rapid thumping of her heart. "Maybe she's right. Maybe we can't live without each other."

* * *

Meanwhile, two people were sitting by the side of the dirty road which spanned the small rise and then, circling Zvenigora, dropped into the blue valley beyond and the village of Mikhailovka. One was the man with the haversack who had attracted Semyon's eye. The other was a small, painfully thin woman in her late thirties. Her blouse was patched and her long braids had tumbled out from under her kerchief. Actually, only the man was sitting. The woman was lying face-down on the ground with her head in his lap and sobbing. Her shoulders heaved. The man stroked her sharp shoulder blades and her head gently, lifted her braids to his own face as if he wanted to wipe away his tears. But he was not weeping. His sunken eyes were dry, and they gazed out at the world hungrily, with surprise, and even a bit fearfully.

"The ground is damp, Agata," the man said, still holding on to her braids. "How did you know I'd be home today?"

She raised her head. "How? My heart told me."

"You've been running in the rain."

"Who cares? I kept watching this road for six long years, and today my heart felt as if it'd burst."

"I saw you running, and my feet turned to rubber."

Indeed, when Ivan had caught sight of his wife running towards him his legs had turned to rubber and his walking stick had fallen out of his hand. The storm was approaching. The air was full of its sounds, and the pitch-black sky was being ripped in two overhead as the pieces came crashing down to the shuddering earth below. But Ivan Savelyev had eyes for nothing except the woman running towards

him through the dense wall of dust the storm was driving ahead of itself. For an instant she was concealed from sight by the dust, but then she reappeared, fighting against the wind. When she finally reached him she fell into his arms helplessly. At that very moment the downpour engulfed them. The pounding rain whipped at them as they stood there holding on to each other tightly.

They stood thus until the rain stopped. Then they went to the side of the road and sat down. They had not yet spoken.

Dirty shreds of cloud were moving off beyond the horizon, and the sky was clear and blue above them. Higher still was the round disc of the sun, beaming hotly, carressing them with its warmth and light.

A skylark trilled somewhere between them and the sun. Its song was unexpected and ceased just as suddenly. Then it sounded again. Ivan looked up. His chapped lips smiled. He imagined that the skylark, that little grey bird, had been carrying its song upward in its beak like a trilling chain, but had suddenly dropped it. Then, diving down after its chain of a song, it had snatched it up again and had carried it skyward once more.

Soon a second and then a third skylark joined the first. It seemed then that the sky was filled to overflowing with their songs, but no matter how hard he looked he could not spot a single bird. He could not tell now whether they were carrying their songs up into the heavens or down towards the earth. Actually, it mattered not. What mattered was that their singing, their trilling filled the air.

"So you see, Agata, life goes on," he said softly.

"I can't stand them. The day Yakov Aleinikov took you away they kept trilling and trilling."

Ivan frowned. The creases on his forehead became deeper. "I could hear them summer and winter. I'd wake up at night. It'd be cold in the barracks, and the wind would be howling outside. I'd listen closely, and it wouldn't be a blizzard. I'd hear a skylark. And I'd feel warmer."

Agata's round, currant-black eyes gazed at her husband in wonder. "How did you ever survive? "

"A man can take a lot."

"I kept waiting for a letter at first."

"I wasn't allowed to write. Well, tell me how you've been."

"Volodya and Dasha are all right."

"Then ... it's a girl?" he said hoarsely and his dry lips trembled.

"Oh, Ivan."

"I kept wondering whether it was a boy or a girl. And whether the child was alive. Not knowing was what made it all so hard."

Agata stroked his coarse, gnarled hand. "You must have done a lot of hard digging."

"I'd say that if you piled up all the dirt I moved it would make a hill about the size of Zvenigora. So you named her Dasha?"

"Yes. Don't you like it?"

"Sure, I do. Dasha's a fine name. Come, let's go."

The skylarks trilled incessantly above them.

When they reached the top of the rise they could see the entire valley below. The cottages of Mikhailovka lay scattered about on the very bottom, their windows and roofs flashing in the sun. Poplars and birches billowed above the rooftops. A tall column of smoke rose straight up in the center of the village.

Ivan pulled off his cap and stood there on the rise, gazing down at the village couched against the forest. A breeze ruffled his light hair. "I kept thinking I wouldn't recognize it, but I do. It hasn't changed, though the poplars are much taller.

"Why should it have changed? The threshing floor's new. There it is. See the wooden overhang on the north side? And there are two new cow barns, right there beyond the smoke. And that's all. That's all we need. The threshing floor and the cow barns are real sturdy. They're made of larch to last forever. Pankrat is a good manager."

"How is he?"

"He's aged a lot. And he's quietened down. He keeps to himself a lot. And he's forever coughing." She suddenly sobbed. "I don't know what ever would have become of me if not for him."

"You mean he helped you that much?"

"Not only me. He helped everybody who had an old, tumbledown house fix it up like new. All sorts of officials coming here from the district center kept telling him he was wasting the farm's money, but he'd say he wasn't spending it on himself. You can't imagine how we all respect him."

"What's that smoke over the house with the sheet-iron roof?"

"That's the bakery. It was put up two years ago. I forgot to mention it. This year Pankrat's putting up a water mill, because he says we're paying too much for having our flour ground. He won't waste a single penny of the farm's money. And that's the bakery. They're baking bread for the reapers. You can see them on the meadow."

On a large meadow near the Gromotukha about three kilometers outside the village they could see the women's bright kerchiefs and the bare, sweaty and glistening, backs of the men. The reapers were moving in rows, swinging their scythes in unison.

Ivan was suddenly overcome by a desire to follow the path down to the meadow, bow low to his fellow villagers, greet them and say here I am, I've come back. And then pick up a scythe and mow until evening, his soul at peace at last. Then, having breathed his fill of the fragrant grasses he would eat his supper and sit by a campfire, listening to a landrail crying in the distance, to the owls awakening and hooting in the thickets, to the boys and girls laughing and talking of the affairs of youth. Thus, in the space of one evening, he would cross out from his memory those six long years. He would forget them completely, as if they had never existed.

The village streets were quiet and deserted. Pigs and calves wandered about among the trampled burdocks. As Ivan and Agata passed along the street an old woman's face would appear at a window here and there and gaze after them.

Ivan's cottage was in a terrible state. It had tilted to one side and the roofboards had caved in and were covered with lichens.

"I thought you said the chairman helped everybody fix up their old houses? "

"Don't be silly! They'd have done him in if he'd spent any money on us! "

"Sure," he agreed and sighed.

Ivan crossed the threshold and saw a thin little girl with big eyes. She had on a dress that reached down to her ankles and was playing with a rag doll in a corner, feeding it strips of raw carrot. At the sight of the unshaven stranger she blinked in terror and backed away to the wall, holding her doll behind her.

"My baby," he said and walked towards her.

The child began to cry, rushed over to her mother and hid in her skirt.

"It's your daddy, Dasha. It's your daddy, silly," Agata said, unable to control her tears as she stroked her tousled hair.

"Well. And where's Volodya? Where's my boy? "

"He drives the water wagon for the mowers. He'll be back at noon to pick up fresh bread at the bakery. I'll send him right over. I've been working there ever since the harvesting began."

An hour later, having shaved, bathed and changed his clothes, Ivan was seated at the table. His head spun from the small glass of vodka he had downed. Agata was relating all the village news, naming those who had died and telling him who had married whom. Some of the news was three, four, and even five years old, but it was all news to Ivan.

"Remember Lusha Kashkarova? Makar Kaftanov finally bought her a house in Shantara and moved her there, and then he landed in jail again. Her house is right next door to your brother's now."

Ivan sat there listening, with his hands cupping his cheeks, gazing at his daughter. She could not yet understand that this strange thin man was her father and so sat at the far end of the table, glancing up at him like a little wild animal as she sucked on the sticky candy he had brought her.

The door creaked. Ivan rose slowly. It was Pankrat Nazarov. He had gotten much older and had grown a beard. He was wearing a long blue shirt over his trousers. It

was tied with a tassled silk cord. Somehow, he did not look at all like the chairman of a collective farm but, rather, like a carpenter or cooper. As he removed his flat cap and hung it on a nail, sawdust filtered down from it.

"I've just been to the mill. I went over to see how things are coming along. We'll have it going by fall." He went over to the table and stood there, staring hard at Ivan. His greenish eyes, encased in wrinkled skin, did not blink once. "So you're back?"

"Yes."

"Well, hello."

"Hello."

Nazarov seemed to be forcing himself to speak, and this made Ivan feel uneasy.

"Come, sit down, Pankrat," Agata said as she bustled about, setting out a plate for him and then a wooden-handled fork. "Here, help yourself and have a drink."

"Don't mind if I do," Nazarov said and sat down. "Well, here's to your homecoming!"

They drank from cloudy wine glasses. Pankrat was immediately siezed by a fit of coughing. He turned away and coughed so hard tears came to his eyes. Agata handed him a towel and he wiped them.

"You shouldn't drink," Ivan said.

"I know. My lung's begun to rot. There's a Whiteguard bullet there, dammit to hell, and after lying still for so long it started acting up on me. The doctor says I have to have my lung out. And Maxim—remember my boy?—wrote and said I should go through with the operation, and that medicine's made a lot of progress. But I'm still afraid to."

"You'll have to have it out anyway in the end. How's Maxim?"

"He's all right. He's doing his stint in the army. He's stationed near Lvov. He's a captain now. You'd better go back to the bakery, Agata. The women put the loaves in. We don't want them to burn. Ivan and I'll talk for a while."

After Agata left, taking their daughter along, the chairman said nothing. He just sat there, looking at Ivan and frowning. He appeared to Ivan then like a suspicious, hostile stranger.

"There's something I want you to tell me, Ivan," Nazarov said slowly and his penetrating gaze did not waver. "You don't have to tell everybody, but tell me. What's on your mind? Are you mad at life? Have you come back with anger in your heart?"

Ivan did not immediately reply. "I don't know, Pankrat. So far, there's not much for me to be happy about. But I don't think I'm mad. I'm homesick. I missed farming and the smell of the land."

Bright dots appeared in Pankrat's green eyes. "How do you feel about your brother Fyodor? And about Kirian Iniutin?"

"That's just it. What did they have me arrested for?" Ivan was silent for a while. "Never mind. But there's one person I don't bear a grudge against, and I can say it for sure. I mean Yakov Aleinikov."

"Hm." This was so unexpected it made Pankrat cough. He squinted at Ivan in disbelief. "So. I'd like to hear why not then."

"I'll try to explain if I can. I saw an awful lot in the camps. Maybe I had a better view of some things from there than you do here. There were all kinds of people there. Important men and people of no importance, and a lot of former army men. Do you think they were all saboteurs? That they're all enemies of the people?"

"So that's it! And you said you didn't bear a grudge against Yakov. That's all the more reason why he should be held responsible!"

"You listen to me now. There are a lot of real enemies of the Soviet people in the camps. I'll tell you about three real enemies I came across. The first was Yerofei Ogorodnikov."

"What! Wasn't he the old shoemaker in the district center? He made me a pair of boots once."

"That's what you think. You were never in Kaftanov's gang, and you never knew a man named Kosorotov. He was a prison warden before the revolution and then he was Colonel Zubov's executioner. They say that hardly anyone died in his clutches without spilling everything he knew first. Oh, I got to know him well. He became Yerofei Ogorodnikov much later, passing himself off for an old

bachelor shoemaker. He even adopted an orphan girl."

Pankrat blinked in surprise.

"The two other real enemies are Colonel Zubov's son and one of the local boys: Makar Kaftanov."

"Makar? You mean he was in there with you? But he's a thief. He's always been jailed as an ordinary criminal."

"That's right. He probably thinks it's easier and safer that way. He's out to get even with the people, because the revolution knocked his kind out of the saddle. And Pyotr Zubov passed for a thief, too. They had a much easier time in jail than I did. Wait a minute. Did you ever hear anything about Colonel Zubov's son? "

"I heard something about him. They say his father took him along wherever he went. And someone once told me that when we attacked Kaftanov's retreat of Ognev Springs you got away with the boy. I think Fyodor told me that."

"That's right. Aleinikov or Anna could have told you, too, because they were both wounded and were lying on the floor there. They could have remembered seeing me. Kaftanov took Zubov's boy off into the taiga later and hid him out there. Lusha Kashkarova brought him and Makar up together."

"So that's why Makar bought her a house."

"You mean you smoke? "

Pankrat was rolling a cigarette. "I'm not supposed to." He sighed and poured the tobacco back into his pouch. "I roll a cigarette, hold it a while and feel better. Like as if I had a smoke."

"So it's that bad? "

"Even worse. I dream of smoking."

"I've forgotten all about it. There's no tobacco out there, so I didn't smoke. Don't carry that pouch around, because some day the temptation will be too great."

"I know. But I don't carry any matches on me. Well, what was it you were getting at? "

"Just this. You think Makar and Pyotr Zubov were just plain, ordinary criminals, but there's another scent on them. And you can't tell what it is right off. Anyway, they swept them up to keep them from stinking. And say they

weren't wrong about them. Now then, the way Yakov sees it, I'm like those other three. Maybe he has his doubts about whether I stole those horses or not, but he swept me up into the same pile just to be on the safe side. It wasn't going to be much of a loss one way or the other."

Savelyev walked up and down the room, stopped by the window and said as he gazed thoughtfully out, "There's another thing I thought a lot about. Say I was in Yakov's shoes. What would I have done? I don't know. I honestly don't."

There was a pause. Then Nazarov shook his head. "You're wrong there, Ivan. You can take a pail of water from the river and it won't be any loss. You can even take a dozen, or a hundred pails. But what if you dig a trench to divert the water and then another, and a dozen more? The river will turn to a trickle, or it'll dry up altogether. Oh, no. No one has the right to hack away at a live limb. Yakov was given a job, and it's his duty to know what he's doing."

Ivan smiled nervously. "His duty. The Lord should keep us all in the fold, but see how many atheists there are? Though everybody says he believes in God. How can Aleinikov or anybody else in his job get to the heart of every case when people can't even manage to straighten things out between themselves? You take us again, for instance."

"Say I have. Then what? "

"Look at it this way. You could say Makar Kaftanov and me are sort of related, because his sister Anna is married to my brother Fyodor. Then again, we're the worst of enemies, I shot his father, and he knows I did. When he saw me in the camp he came over and said, 'Hello, stranger. Do you ever think about my father?' That smile sent chills down my back. I knew what it meant, but I couldn't say anything. Then he bent close and whispered, 'You'd better say your prayers and put on some clean clothes the day after tomorrow. Be sure you do, because nobody around here bothers about dressing a corpse. And don't think I'm just getting even for my father. Blood feuds aren't my line. We'll slit you open on the basis of the teachings of Karl Marx and Comrade Lenin

on the class struggle.' Then he decided I didn't understand and said, 'It's because you went over to the Reds, you bitch.' And he walked off, whistling. So he'd named the time. I knew that was all I had left of my life, that day and the one after. That was for sure. The camps have their own laws, you know. So what was I to do? "

"Mmm." Pankrat shook his head.

"There was something I could have done. I could have saved my neck by dishing up Fyodor to them."

Pankrat's shaggy, wiry brows arched in surprise.

"It's easy to figure it out. Pyotr Zubov has a goal in life. He wants to find and kill the man who killed his father. Meaning Fyodor."

"Oh? "

"Yes. Pyotr Zubov once said to me, 'I still remember the man who killed my father. I remember his little black moustache. I remember his face when he raised his sabre over my head.' Fyodor nearly killed the boy in his rage, you know. 'But I don't remember anything else.' Well, I haven't forgotten a thing that happened that day. All I had to do was tell him who killed his father and then he or Kosorotov would have seen to Makar Kaftanov if he ever laid a finger on me. Besides, no matter which way you look at it, Pyotr Zubov wouldn't be alive today if not for me. Why shouldn't I have told him? Why was I in prison? Who was the one who sent me there? My own brother Fyodor. So why did I have to worry about him? And maybe Makar Kaftanov would have changed his mind. He couldn't forgive his sister either for being a partisan and then marrying Fyodor. He said he'd get that Red-assed bitch sooner or later."

"Did you tell them? " Pankrat asked cautiously. He was rolling another cigarette.

"No," Ivan sighed. "Look at it this way: I was sent to prison as an enemy of the people. Makar was there as a criminal. He was a thief, but he was also an enemy, and he wanted to kill me, another enemy. He said it had something to do with the class struggle. Now how could Yakov Aleinikov ever straighten this out if we couldn't ourselves? "

The chairman was silent for a long while. His large,

stiff fingers rolled and crushed a cigarette. Then he poured the tobacco back into his pouch. Finally, he said, "Life is strange. Don't be mad at me for asking, but I want to know how come he didn't kill you if you didn't tell them about Fyodor?"

"I was put into solitary," Ivan replied evenly.

"How come?"

"The next morning I said I wouldn't go to work. And I cursed the barracks elder. Anyway, I was put into solitary for twenty days. And then... I guess I was born under a lucky star. While I was in solitary, Kosorotov, Zubov and Makar escaped. I guess they'd been waiting for their chance. The dogs killed Kosorotov, but Makar and Zubov got away. I kept looking over my shoulder for six months after I got out of solitary, because if Makar had told anyone to take care of me for him they would have. But he didn't."

The chairman sat there listening and tugged at his beard absently. "No, sir," he finally said in reply to some unspoken thought. "I still say I wouldn't pardon Yakov. He has no right sweeping everyone into one pile, because he's been given a lot of power and it's his duty to untie every knot and get to the bottom of things, to tell the grain from the chaff. All right, say there were things in your past that made some people suspect you. But you take Baulin, Vasily Zasukhin and Koshkin. What was their crime? You know they've been arrested, don't you?"

"Yes. Agata just told me."

"We fought through the war together, and I knew them after. They were all good men, even though they didn't have much education. Actually, none of us did. Every time there'd be something I couldn't figure out myself, I'd go to the district center to talk it over with one or the other of them. These were my comrades. They were defending the interests of the people and they understood the problems. Or you take Arkady Molchanov, for instance. There's one boy you can say grew up right here with all of us knowing when he got up in the morning and when he went off to take a piss. And what do you know? He's an enemy, too. He hasn't been released yet. What do you say to that?"

"I don't know about the other three, but Molchanov's in prison on account of stupidity."

"Whose? "

"His own. When they were at me about those horses they kept questioning him, too, saying he was lying about Iniutin taking the horses off to the gypsy camp. They kept asking him how much I'd paid him for lying. How big the bribe was."

"How do you know? "

"I was in the preliminary detention cell at the district center then, and that's one place where they always know everything. I don't know how all the rumors and news reaches there, but it does, and everything's hashed over. Anyway, he didn't talk for an awful long time and then finally said that being as they were put there to do a job, they had to find out what was what first, and not make people slander an innocent man. Well, it was like a dam breaking. You know, Pankrat, that once Arkady gets started even though it's only once a year there's no stopping him. Well, he sure told them off, and half of it was cursing."

"All right, that's as far as he's concerned. But I mean in general. Something's wrong." He looked at Savelyev intently, waiting for him to reply.

"You keep asking me, but what can I say? I'm not that educated," Ivan said sadly. "Life spins around like cream in a churn, and then you suddenly see that the cream's turned to butter."

"What do you mean? "

"Don't you think Yakov Aleinikov wants things to be fair and square? "

"So? "

"What'd he fight in the war for? He was always in the middle of every battle, but he only had one life, just like everybody else. I'm sure he wasn't all that anxious to say goodbye to it."

"So? "

"A man doesn't always see what the fair thing is. It's not that easy."

Pankrat sat there for a while in silence. Then he rose, straightened up with difficulty, looked down at his hand

and was surprised to see he was holding his pouch. He stuck it in his pocket and said, "It's a funny thing. I come here to find out whether you'd come back with a grudge against everybody and put some sense into you, but somehow it's turned out the other way. Here you are, trying to stand up for Yakov."

"No, I'm not. I just said I didn't hold any grudge against him."

The door opened and a boy of about thirteen entered. He was not very tall, was as blond as Ivan and had his father's large forehead and gray eyes. He was barefoot, and was dressed in a pair of faded, dusty pants which flapped against his legs and a creased black shirt open at the collar. He was carrying a whip.

Once inside the room the boy pressed against the wall as he looked from his father to the chairman with frightened, uncomprehending eyes. Savelyev took a step towards his son.

"How big you've got, Volodya. Hello, son."

Volodya buried his head in his father's shoulder.

* * *

No trace remained of the storm. The earth had hungrily absorbed the puddles, and now the houses, trees and grasses, washed clean by the rain, seemed fresher than they had in the morning.

Mikhailovka Village was as dead and deserted as before. Hens, prostrated by the heat, lay in the shade of the houses with their beaks open. The village dogs had also sought the shade and lay there panting with their long pink tongues lolling.

This absolute stillness in the air above Mikhailovka and Shantara, and the entire region seemed to extend over the rest of the world as well, while in the blue skies the sun blazed relentlessly. It was impossible to imagine that at this very moment there was neither stillness, nor a clear sky, nor the sun somewhere else, that both earth and sky had become a roaring volcano, that the air was filled with human cries, and that war had broken out several hours before.

Anton Savelyev was trudging along Drogobych Highway. He was carrying his creased jacket and often raised a tip of it to wipe his grimy, sweaty face. The sun darted into the billowing, greasy clouds of smoke to reappear again at rare moments in some clear spot. At one such moment Anton realized that it was away past noon.

In those rare instants he could see flocks of German bombers heading east, flock after flock of them. They were flying high now, droning monotonously, their targets apparently far in the interior.

Ack-ack guns were booming somewhere along the highway. Anton saw the white puffs of explosions. However, the shells did not reach the bombers, they did not inflict any damage on them. "Where are our fighter planes? What's happened to them?" he fumed.

"There's an I-16! Look! Watch him go!" he heard someone shout.

A small fighter plane with stars on its wings was seen streaking through the shreds of black smoke that covered the sky. All movement stopped on the highway. Everyone was looking upward. The little plane rammed into the very center of a group of German bombers with a roar that was immediately strangled. A long trail of fiery red-black smoke emerged from its tail. It cut across the sky at an angle and crashed not far from the highway. The sound of a loud explosion followed, and a tremor passed through the earth. People left their carts and ran through the woods to the site of the crash. Savelyev turned on his heel and headed back to Peremyshl.

He wandered along the left side of the road into the current coming towards him: an endless procession of carts and trucks piled high with suitcases and belongings tossed in at random. Women, children and old men were sitting on these bundles. The men walked alongside, pushing handcarts that were also piled high with bundles and suitcases, and many carried suitcases. The children cried, for they were frightened by the catastrophe and commotion, and they were hungry. The women pressed their children to them as they gazed wild-eyed at the holocaust. The truck drivers kept honking their horns and shouting as they hung out of their cabs, yelling to the drivers ahead,

urging them on. All this was drowned in the crashing and clanging of metal, in the clouds of dust and gasoline exhaust, because moving along the right side of the highway towards Peremyshl were tanks, armored cars, army trucks carrying Red Army men, boxes of ammunition and coils of barbed wire.

The right side of the highway had been torn up by caterpillars, but still the tanks, armored cars and trucks did not slacken their speed. Pebbles and stones flew out from under the moving vehicles, raining down upon the refugees.

Anton was terribly thirsty, but it was impossible in the confusion to ask anyone for a drink of water and doubtful whether anyone had any. He was a long way from Peremyshl. What would he find when he got there? What if the Germans were already there? He certainly wasn't going to Peremyshl to get a drink of water. What then was his purpose?

Anton stopped and looked around. The highway turned off to the left up ahead, causing the military vehicles to cut their speed on the curve in order not to hit the refugees. Savelyev made his way through the human stream and got a hand-hold on the side of a moving truck.

"Let go!" a young Red Army soldier sitting in the back of the truck shouted and snatched up his rifle. "Let go! There's cargo here."

"Take it easy, son. I have to get to Peremyshl."

"Let go, I said! We're not going to Peremyshl. We're going someplace else."

The snub-nosed soldier's face was round and tanned. He was trying his best to be stern, but didn't look very convincing.

The truck began gaining speed and was soon racing along, with the squat hood of an armored car right behind.

"Where can I jump? Under a tank? Hand me over to your commander at the first stop. Put down your gun. I won't ruin your cargo."

"Jump, or I'll shoot!" the soldier shouted.

"Go on, shoot," Anton said and averted his head.

The truck bounced on the potholes made during the previous hours by many wheels and on stones pulled up by

iron caterpillars. Anton bounced on a crate in the back of the truck. "It's a good thing the nazis aren't bombing the highway," he was thinking and shuddered when he imagined what would happen if they did.

The truck was rapidly approaching Peremyshl, now concealed behind a screen of smoke. With each passing minute the cannonade was becoming louder.

The truck turned off onto a dirt road and raced along a flat, marshy stretch covered with bushes and young trees. They had been broken and bruised in many places, so that the tree trunks looked like bleached bones. Savelyev guessed that tanks, many tanks, had passed through here.

"Where are we going? "

"Shut up, you rat! " The soldier raised his gun.

"Watch your tongue! " Savelyev shouted.

"How do I know who you are? Don't make a move!

The earth suddenly rose up in front and to the side of the truck. Clods of dirt spattered the top of the cab and the crates. A moment before the explosion Anton had glimpsed the narrow, glittering ribbon of the river to the left. This stretch of the road could be seen clearly from the other side. There were three more explosions to the right, in front and in back of them. The motor roared as the driver stepped on the gas. Savelyev clutched a heavy crate, embracing it. Then the truck veered off into a wood and the booming stopped.

Savelyev brushed the earth off his clothes. "Whew! They have the road in their sights there."

"You bet they do. This is my third trip today," the soldier ventured in a more friendly voice.

The truck finally pulled up. A young infantry captain and several Red Army men appeared from the wood.

"Kruzhilin! Good for you! " the captain shouted. "You've got five minutes to unload! " he said to his men.

"There's a man in the back of the truck, Captain," Kruzhilin reported as he jumped down. "I took him prisoner on the go. He got in on the way and said he had to get to Peremyshl."

The captain went over to Anton. His eyes flashed sternly under the shiny visor of the cap. "Who are you? What's your name? "

"Savelyev."

"Come on! Hurry! " The captain shouted to his men. "Savelyev? Come along."

The arms of a stereoscopic range finder protruded from a deep trench at the edge of the wood. The captain jumped down into the trench. Savelyev followed.

A graying man with a yellowish bald pate and wearing the insignia of a regimental commissar was hunched over a field telephone, shouting, "Where are the tanks you've promised? What? There won't be any? Then they'll crush us! The Germans are setting up a new pontoon bridge across the San. Why can't I hear Nekrasov? I said: why are the guns silent? What do you mean, there aren't any shells? Then we'll be crushed! No, I'm not panicking. I'm not panicking. We've only got about two hundred men left in the regiment. We've been holding our positions for twenty-four hours. What ammunition? We don't have any left."

"Kruzhilin just brought in a truckfull of grenades and cartridges, Commissar," the captain reported.

"Yes, the truck is here. We can hold off the infantry. But what if they send over tanks? And they surely will. What? We're to hold the line? Yes. I understand." The commissar straightened up and said softly and sadly in a very everyday sort of voice, as if they were discussing some small favor, "Of course, Grigory Trofimovich. Of course we'll hold out. Yes, thank you. Yes, see you soon."

Then he examined Savelyev's papers intently and at length. Savelyev told the commissar how he had come to be in Peremyshl and for some reason or other in detail of the hotel collapsing and the women's cries, and the Soviet fighter plane crashing.

"I suddenly felt so ashamed. Why was I running away? I can still hold a gun. I haven't forgotten how to shoot."

"Yes, I understand," the commissar said sadly, returning Savelyev's papers. "You see, this morning the Germans dropped a large number of paratroopers disguised as Red Army men into the interior."

As the commissar spoke he rubbed his gray temples and small pulsing veins. His thoughts were far away, miles away from Savelyev and the words he had just spoken. The

captain, who had been looking through the range finder, now shouted,

"They're completing the bridge, Comrade Commissar! "

"Still and all, you'd better leave, Savelyev," the commissar said, going over to the captain. "It'll probably be too late in fifteen minutes from now."

"I'll stay, if I may."

Before the commissar had a chance to reply, a gun boomed beyond the San River. A moment later the earth rose in a solid wall about twenty meters from the trench. No sooner had it crumbled than another, broader and higher than the first, rose up. It seemed as though branches and planks, and something round like a tire rolled off the top of the wall. "Was Kruzhilin's truck hit? Were they able to unload it? Did they have enough time to? " The questions raced through Savelyev's mind.

The commissar was shouting to the captain and pointing, but his words drowned in the thunder of explosions. Then the two of them, forgetting Savelyev, ran off along the trench. Anton stood there, not knowing what to do. His eyes came to rest on a rifle someone had leaned against the wall of the trench. He grabbed it and ran after the other two.

After a few meters the trench became more shallow. Then it forked and ended abruptly. Savelyev was on slope of a hill. The river glittered below. He saw the bridge the commissar had spoken of. Several mangled German tanks were smoldering on the nearer bank. However, dozens of other German tanks were now lumbering across the bridge.

Someone was shooting at Savelyev. Hot blasts scorched his neck and face. He saw bullets hit the ground and raise up spurts of dust all around him, but seemed at a loss, not knowing what to do until he finally headed instinctively towards the woods. Bullets kept zipping all around him. "If I make it to the woods I'll probably survive," he was thinking calmly as he ran. Suddenly, there was no ground under his feet. He was falling.

"Look, we've got company," he heard someone saying. "Where'd you come from? The sky? "

Anton was on the bottom of another trench. Several

Red Army men were crouching beside him. The trench was only about thirty meters long but so well camouflaged he had not noticed it.

"I brought this crazy fellow here," a familiar voice said. "I had a hard time trying to decide whether he was a nazi paratrooper or not."

"Kruzhilin! Did you manage to unload the truck?"

"Nearly."

There were about eight soldiers in the trench. Three men stretched out at the far end were covered with great-coats.

"Where were they shooting at me from?" Anton said, rubbing his bruised side.

"There they are, dug in the sand on the other side. We've had them pinned down since this morning," the sergeant said and fingered the metal triangles on his collar wings.

"Look, boys! The tanks are coming!" someone shouted in a frightened voice.

"Shut up!" The sergeant knelt and looked over the top of the trench. "You're right. What's the matter? Don't you remember seeing any tanks today? Nekrasov's battery'll take care of them."

"Not any more," Savelyev thought unhappily.

By now all the soldiers were crouching and looking over the top in gloomy silence. Below them the dark-green tanks marked with black-and-white crosses crawled off the pontoon bridge and, turning and reviving their motors, headed one left, one right, one left, one right.

"They're going to encircle us," Kruzhilin said softly.

"How could you have let them lay the bridge?" Savelyev asked.

By way of reply bullets whizzed overhead and were followed by bursts of sub-machine gun fire. The whizzing and clatter blended into a long wail. The soldiers pressed close to the bottom of the trench, although two of them were still looking out in the direction of the firing. Then they slid down slowly and somehow reluctantly.

"Dammit! I said nobody stick your head out unless you have to!" the sergeant raged. "Pull them over to those three." The whites of his eyes flashed as he looked at

Savelyev. "Try to keep them down at a time like this."

Heavy smoke was rising in the distance, and covering the sky. Anton guessed it was the town of Peremyshl burning. "What about Lvov? Did they bomb Lvov? Did Yura get there this morning?" Such were his anxious thoughts.

All of a sudden the explosions in back of them ceased and the bullets stopped whizzing overhead. The sergeant laid his gun on the ridge and spat on his hands, as was the old peasant custom before attacking a hard job. "Ready, men! "

The tanks had fanned out from the river, and now four of them were climbing the slope towards their trench. Large numbers of German troops in steel helmets were running behind the tanks. From above they seemed small and short-legged.

"Fire! " the sergeant yelled.

The unconcentrated fire of their rifles blended with bursts of enemy sub-machine gun fire and the roaring of tank motors, and was lost. Savelyev aimed at the grey-green figure of a running German soldier and fired. The German took several steps, stumbled, threw out his arms and fell. Savelyev was surprised, "So I haven't forgotten how to shoot."

After that he kept firing repeatedly until the trigger clicked. When he turned to see whom he could ask for some cartridges his eyes met the dimming gaze of the sergeant.

"Here ... in my case," the boy whispered as he slid down into the trench. Bloody bubbles appeared on his lips and burst at each word he uttered.

"Sergeant! Hear me, son?" Anton said and shook him, but the boy had closed his eyes. His head rolled back.

Anton rose. The tanks were very close and the infantry troops were now about three hundred meters behind them. Shots were being fired from all over the hill, for there were many more small trenches like the one Anton was in.

"Let the tanks pass! Cut the infantry off from them! " the captain shouted as he jumped down into the trench. "Oh, is that you, Savelyev? So you didn't leave? Prokhorov! Where's the sergeant? "

"Here," Kruzhilin replied, nodding towards his body.

The captain leaned over the dead youth. "He was the best man in my batallion. And my batallion's the best in the regiment." He was silent and then added, "The first and third batallions have been wiped out. Many of the men broke under attack. But my men won't run. Did you ever see my men, even one of them, on the run? "

"No."

Iron grated and clanged over them as a tank rolled across the trench, covering them with soot and dirt, and filling the trench with fumes. The captain fell upon the sergeant's body as though he wanted to shield him from the caterpillars.

"And you won't ever see them," he said, brushing off the clods of dirt. Then he added, "Maybe you'll get scared and turn tail, Kruzhilin? "

"No, I won't."

"Well... Actually, the Germans have advanced far in to the left and right. Hand grenades, everybody! "

Savelyev looked out of the trench and saw the Germans fifty meters away. He had never seen them so close before. Their dirty-gray shirts were open at the collar, and their sleeves were rolled up, although they all had on steel helmets. They were running towards the trench in a large, disorganized body.

"Ready! " the captain shouted.

Savelyev had no hand grenades. He pressed some cartridges into the magazine, and as he took aim at a broad-shouldered nazi he was thinking that the German could probably see him just as clearly and had even raised his sub-machine gun, pointing it at him. Anton did not have a chance to fire, because a fountain of earth rose up before the German. He saw the man bend backwards, then side-ways and fall. Then everything was out off from sight by a hail of grenade explosions.

"Cease fire! " the captain shouted.

The shooting stopped. The smoke and dust on the slope were settling slowly. There were Germans strewn about the ground in front of the trench, but these were not corpses.

"Give them hell, boys! " the captain shouted, forgetting his military training. His voice could be heard across

the slope. "Don't let them raise their heads! Fire point-blank!"

Once again rifle fire resounded all over the hill. The Germans, having dotted the slopes with the bodies of their dead, began crawling back, retreating to their old positions on the bank. All was quiet now.

The captain wiped his grimy forehead and looked around. "Is everybody all right?"

"Just about," Kruzhilin replied and began dragging the bodies of his comrades off to the far end of the trench.

The captain, Kruzhilin, Savelyev and three other soldiers had come through. The captain's left arm hung limply. A large dark spot was spreading over his shoulder.

"So," he said, compressed his bloodless lips, sat down and leaned his face against the wall of the trench.

"Let me bandage your arm," Kruzhilin said.

The captain did not reply.

"They'll be coming up again now," Savelyev said.

"I think they'll wait a while. Why risk it? Listen," the captain said and indicated at the wall of the trench.

Savelyev pressed his ear against it and heard a faint rumbling. "It sounds like tanks very far away."

"No, they're not far away at all. They've nearly reached the bridge."

Savelyev rose up a bit and saw a new column of tanks moving towards the river on the other side.

"But where's our artillery?" Kruzhilin groaned after taking a look at the river. "Why are our guns silent?" he asked the captain.

"Am I in command of the guns, Kruzhilin?" the captain demanded.

Kruzhilin lowered his head.

In silence they listened to the tanks rumbling across the bridge.

"Listen, Captain, we've got to do something," Savelyev said at last.

"What, for instance?" the captain inquired indifferently. "Retreat?"

"Perhaps."

"So," the captain smiled bitterly. "Don't you know the orders?"

"But we're losing men for nothing. It's senseless."

"I don't know."

"What don't you know? "

"Whether it's senseless or not. The divisional commanders know."

The captain moaned from the pain in his shoulder and closed his eyes. Savelyev was sorry for him, but was angry at the same time. He said to himself, "He's probably a dim-witted martinet. So he hasn't received an order to retreat yet."

Savelyev had spoken of retreating, but not because he was frightened. He was not thinking of himself at all. Simply, the situation called for cool-headed, logical thinking.

"Savelyev," the captain said, "there is something I wanted to ask you. I was wondering whether a man named Ivan Savelyev who comes from Mikhailovka Village in Siberia is any relation of yours? "

Anton was so surprised he turned completely about to face the captain who was still sitting on the ground with his eyes closed. His grimy forehead was covered with large drops of perspiration.

"Yes. He's my brother. My younger brother."

"I knew it," the captain opened his eyes. "I recognized you. The one who lives in Shantara is dark."

"That's right. Who are you? "

"My name's Nazarov. Maxim Nazarov. I'm from Mikhailovka, too. My father's Chairman of the local collective farm. I was home on leave last year. Vasily Kruzhilin from back home is in my outfit."

"Kruzhilin? " Anton frowned and rubbed his forehead. "Kruzhilin. Hm. The name's familiar, but I can't seem to recall where I heard it. I was still a kid when I left home. That was back in 1910. You mean Ivan and I look that much alike? "

"Yes. Do you know whether he's been released yet? "

"No. I know he was sentenced, but I don't know why. I wrote and asked Fyodor several times, but he's never answered my letters. Then I wrote to Ivan's wife, and she says he's innocent."

The air had been filled with the sound of roaring

motors and the clang of caterpillars for some time. The captain stirred, raised himself up and looked over the top.

"They're coming. This is going to be hell. There's still time for you to get out, Savelyev. We've no right to. You came here with Kruzhilin, didn't you? Down the Dro-gobych Highway? You saw what it's like there. It's our job to hold the Germans back as long as we can and give the people a chance to get as far as they can from Pere-myshl. That's the whole idea of what we're doing here. There are women and children there."

Savelyev's throat felt dry. He swallowed hard. "I see. I'm staying. My place is here, too."

"It's up to you," Nazarov said indifferently. "I'm leaving you in command, Kruzhilin. Let the tanks roll over you like we just did and cut off the infantry. If you need me, I'll be at the battalion command post." He climbed out of the trench quickly and ran across the slope, holding his cap on with his good hand and disregarding the bullets whistling all around him.

At Kruzhilin's command the men set out their hand grenades.

"Do you know how to use it, old man? " Kruzhilin said, handing one to Anton.

"Yes. But the ones I know about were mostly home-made ones."

"It's easy. All you do is pull out the pin and throw it."

However, they were not to have an opportunity to use their grenades this time. The tanks rolled up the slope and began moving back and forth on the flat top with a vicious roaring, each turning around its axis, ploughing up the shallow trenches and crushing the men in them. A huge clanging monster was approaching their trench, blocking out the smoke-scarred sky.

"Down flat, everybody! " Kruzhilin shouted, but his words were barely audible.

There were explosions and scattered shooting coming from nearby. Anton turned to see a black iron monster moving slowly between the next two trenches, while the soldiers in them kept tossing grenades at it and firing at the observation slits. The tank was impenetrable. The grenades bounced off its armor and exploded all around it.

"Get down! " Kruzhilin shouted into his ear and jerked his jacket.

As Anton fell he saw the tank let out a jet of red and black smoke and then burst into flames. "Aha! " he shouted. He also glimpsed at the bright ribbon of the river below, the Germans who were scrambling up the slope in scattered groups and the flat, dirty bottom of the tank overhead. It kept rising higher and higher into the air and then came down upon the trench like a huge iron lid. "We'll get you now," Savelyev said to himself as he gripped his grenade. He fell awkwardly, twisting his arm. The grenade bit into his ribs painfully. "Just wait a sec," he muttered through his teeth, trying to overcome the pain. Loose dirt began falling on his back and covered him completely. There was no air left, none at all. Green and orange bubbles appeared before his eyes in the blackness and popped loudly, sending off blinding sparks in all directions.

* * *

Anton came to his senses when someone tried to twist his arm. He moaned.

"Good! You're alive. But be quiet! Very quiet," the words came to him through the buzzing in his head. He felt a great weight lifting. "Come on out."

Vasily Kruzhilin had freed Anton's head and shoulders from the earth. Then, getting hold of him, he managed to pull him out. Anton sat up. His breath came in gasps. He breathed the warm night air in deeply. It smelled of gunpowder, gasoline and scorched paint.

"Is that you, son? Who else is alive?"

Kruzhilin did not reply. He was sitting nearby, examining a German sub-machine gun and trying to snap in the magazine.

Campfires were burning across the San River and lights flickered among the trees. Savelyev's side ached. He stuck his dirty hand under his shirt and felt his ribs, trying to determine whether or not they were broken, but could not.

"It's so damn dark! " Kruzhilin sounded annoyed. "How the hell does this go in? "

It was so still it was impossible to believe that a battle had raged here but a short while before. A huge black bulk could be seen a short distance away. It was probably the tank that had been destroyed by grenades. The sky seemed still to be covered by smoke, for every now and then a sprinkling of stars would appear, only to disappear again. Then again, perhaps it was only the wind driving the clouds.

The pain in Anton's side subsided, and he decided that perhaps he had no broken ribs after all.

"What'll we do now? We can't just sit here. We've got to do something."

"Nothing like being young and single! " Kruzhilin said and smiled. "We'll go to Peremyshl, have a couple of drinks to get our courage up, and drop in on some girls. I have a real, fine girl in Peremyshl. And you should see her girlfriend! She kept asking me to bring over one of my friends for her girlfriend. How do you feel about women, Dad? Are you still up to it? "

Kruzhilin chuckled. Strangely, his lewd chuckle and his offer did not anger Anton or offend him, but made him smile in response. He saw that Kruzhilin was not a lecherous fellow at all, but that his blood was young and he was full of life. He was happy with the knowledge that Kruzhilin had survived this day, this holocaust, and that he would survive the war. After all, the Germans would be forced back beyond the San in another week, or two at the most, and Kruzhilin would again be able to visit his fine girl in Peremyshl. There would be a monument to those who had perished in this battle on the hill. It would probably be a simple wooden obelisk topped by a star. He would have to come back here one day to see it.

Vasily kept fiddling with the sub-machine gun. A spring clicked. "So that's how it works." He sounded pleased. As he rose he said, "Come on, Dad. And take this rifle."

Kruzhilin's uniform was in shreds. One of his sleeves was singed, and there were smears of dried blood on his face. Anton glimpsed all this when the moon tumbled out

of the clouds of smoke for a moment (for it was smoke) and shed its pale, milky light on the scarred earth.

"Are you wounded?" Savelyev asked.

"Not really. The caterpillar grazed me. If it was any closer it would have mashed my head. But all it did was scrape my face and pull out a tuft of hair. I'm lucky."

Kruzhilin led the way. He walked quickly, and his step was firm. He seemed to know where he was going.

"That's what Olyà says. She says I'm lucky, and when I asked her why, you know what she said? 'That's because I love you.'" Kruzhilin turned, waited for Savelyev to catch up with him and added in stern confidence, "We're going to get married. As soon as I do my stint. I only have three months to go. Then I'll take her back to Shantara. My family was living in Oirotiya when I was called up. That's where my father was working then, but he's been transferred back to Shantara again. We'll get married as soon as we get back to Shantara. How's that?"

"Where are we going?"

"I really am lucky," Vasily continued. "You don't know what it was like! After the tanks got through mashing up the trenches they went on, and then the infantry rushed up the slope. They were running wild here, shouting and shooting, killing off everyone who was still alive. I was lying there, covered with dirt, with only my head sticking out. I don't know why they didn't finish me off. Probably because my head was all bloody, and they thought I was dead. They pulled some of the boys out of the trenches and herded them all together. Then they drove off everybody who could walk and shot all the rest. I could see it all. Then everybody left. I could've gotten out of here before dark, but there were troops, cars and trucks pulling big guns coming across the bridge all the time. They would've noticed me."

He kept on talking and talking without a stop. His voice grated unpleasantly on Savelyev's ears. Kruzhilin seemed so happy about having been born under a lucky star, and went on talking about his good luck. He slowed down, and a moment later Kruzhilin stopped again. When Savelyev caught up with him the boy suddenly swayed and buried his bloody head in his shoulder.

"Kruzhilin! Vasily! What's the matter?"

"I saw it all, all of it," he sobbed. "The caterpillars were full of blood. The tanks were all spattered with blood. Right up to the turrets. And there were intestines dragging along behind some of them. Like wet ropes. How did it all happen? Why?"

He was sobbing loudly like a child. Savelyev could not reply. He kept stroking the boy's back and dirty, blood-caked hair.

"It's all right. It's all right, son. Everything'll be all right." Then he added, "You marry your Olya. You be sure and marry her, hear me?"

Vasily broke away and started off quickly, practically at a run. Savelyev hurried on behind, fearful of losing sight of his hunched figure in the dark.

He caught up with Kruzhilin at the edge of the woods. He was crouching beside a man stretched out on the ground. Savelyev bent down and recognized Captain Nazarov.

"Here," Vasily said, pointing his fist at Savelyev. "The old fellow I picked up on the road. There's nobody else left."

"Did you make sure, Kruzhilin?" Nazarov wheezed. His eyes seemed to be closed.

"I was all over the slope. I touched everybody. There's nobody else."

"All right, Kruzhilin. Good for you, Vasily. Thank you. But don't waste any time on me."

"What're you talking about, Captain? You're going to be at my wedding. That's for sure."

"Is there any water?"

"No. Wait. I saw a German lying there. He had a flask." Kruzhilin disappeared into the darkness.

Nazarov's breath came in labored, wheezing gasps. Savelyev sat beside him with his rifle clasped between his knees. His mind was a blank. He felt no joy at having survived, at having been rescued by Kruzhilin.

"Are you all right, Savelyev?"

"I don't know. There's a ringing in my ears. But I think that's all."

"If you make it out of here, tell my father, write and

tell him.... You know what to say.... You were here. You saw what we could do, and what we couldn't. Kruzhilin shouldn't have dragged me here. My legs are broken. Both of them. And my shoulder. And my chest."

Kruzhilin appeared from the darkness, crouched down by the captain and helped him to drink from the flask. Then he said, "We'll have to go into the woods. Deep into the woods. Then we'll decide what to do. Our men have to be someplace there. Hear me, Captain?"

"Yes. You go on. Leave me here. That's an order. Is that clear? "

"Clear as day."

It must have been after midnight. A light breeze brought a freshness to the air, carrying the stench of explosions and gasoline off beyond the river. The treetops rustled ominously.

The same breeze brought them the distant sound of cannonade. Savelyev felt himself turning pale, and an unpleasant chill seeped into his heart. Kruzhilin stood behind him motionlessly, and even the captain had stopped wheezing a bit. The three men strained to hear the vague and distant rumbling.

"How come? How could they have gotten that far? How far in is it? " Kruzhilin said dazedly, voicing the thought that had made Savelyev turn pale.

"It's coming from beyond the Dnestr.... They must be bombing our airfield," Nazarov said softly. "There's an airfield near Drogobych.... They couldn't... have got that far." Even Savelyev understood that Nazarov was saying this to console them, as if it was not the sound of bombs bursting, but of artillery fire.

"All right," Vasily said, rising resolutely and handing the sub-machine gun to Savelyev. "Let's get a move on it. There isn't much time left till dawn."

"This is an order, Kruzhilin.... Don't touch me! Go on."

Kruzhilin paid no attention to what the captain was saying or to his moans as he raised him to a sitting position. Then he crouched down beside him, pulled Nazarov over and onto his shoulder, straightened up and stood still for a few moments, as if testing his weight. Then he staggered off towards the woods.

They followed the forest paths until dawn, heading in the general direction of Lvov, taking turns carrying the captain, whose body was limp and heavy. At first, Nazarov kept moaning, but then he stopped, giving no sign of life. They walked on in silence. Once only as Kruzhilin transferred his burden to Savelyev did the latter say,

"Is he still alive?"

"He's still warm," Vasily replied, breathing rapidly through his mouth.

The captain's weight made Anton's legs buckle. He thought he would stumble and drop the wounded man at the very first step he took, but was greatly surprised to find himself pressing onward without a stop. He would sometimes trip over a hummock, and his feet got tangled in the grass, but he kept on going, fearful lest he fell and knowing that he would not.

It was still dark and very quiet. They did not know where they were going nor why, nor whether the previous day's horror had been a nightmare, a hallucination. Anton felt that dawn would break and with its coming everything would fall into place: he would return to Peremyshl, go to the barbershop in the morning, and the old barber would lather his cheeks with his hand and would tell him some tale as he stropped the razor. Then he would go to the brick factory and give the director hell. Then he would place a call to his family in Lvov, talk to his son, who would have just arrived, and tell his wife that he would be detained for several more days, because the director of the brick factory didn't want to sign the shipping order. "But why am I so positive he doesn't? Maybe he'll tell his men to start loading the bricks immediately. Then I can take the evening train to Lvov."

He was brought back to reality by Kruzhilin's anxious cry.

"Stop! There are Germans there! "

They had reached a road. Dawn was breaking, turning the sky gray. The road led off into the unknown, disappearing in the gloom.

"Where?" Savelyev had not seen any Germans. Shimmering strips of yellow light cut through the fog on the road. Savelyev could not understand what they were.

Kruzhilin nudged him so hard he nearly fell into the dense bushes that lined the road. At last he heard the fast-approaching sound of an automobile.

They lay in the roadside bushes for nearly an hour while German trucks passed in an endless procession, engulfing them in dust and exhaust gases.

A gray haze was spreading over the earth and disappearing. Somewhere the sun was rising tinting the sparse shreds of smoke or dirty clouds a bloody-red. The bushes had only seemed like a thicket in the darkness of the night, but were actually rather thinly scattered. At any rate, Savelyev had a clear view of each and every truck, of the soldiers in the back, sitting in even rows and of the drivers. "They'll spot us. As soon as it gets lighter, they'll spot us," he was thinking.

Vasily was probably thinking the same, because he said hoarsely, repeating the sentence twice as his cut eyebrow twitched in a frown and he pulled the sub-machine gun closer,

"They won't get us easy. They won't get us easy."

Luckily, the trucks passed and they were not spotted. However, they had no way of knowing that several pairs of eyes had them in their gun sights and had been watching them coolly for quite some time from across the road.

They were captured quickly, soundlessly and very simply.

They remained hidden in the bushes for a few minutes after the last of the trucks had disappeared down the road. Then Vasily said,

"Didn't I say I was lucky? You'll be all right if you stay close to me. Are you all right?"

"He's heavy," Savelyev said by way of reply.

Vasily pressed his ear against the captain's chest and listened intently. "I think he's still alive. It's my turn now. Here, take the gun."

Vasily stood up and looked around. He shouldered Nazarov's limp body and crossed the road at a trot.

As they entered a small clearing a terrible blow to the head sent Savelyev sprawling. Still and all, he managed to get back on his feet quickly. Through a bloody film he saw someone's round, smiling, alien face. He also saw Kruzhil-

lin, bent under the captain's weight, turning this way and that helplessly, while several German soldiers stood there laughing as they watched the Russian soldier flounder. All this flashed across his brain in a split-second. He turned to see the fat-faced German picking up the rifle and sub-machine gun which he had dropped when he had been knocked down. Anton lunged, hoping to wrest the gun from him, but just then a second German sprang at him, bringing something hard and heavy down upon his shoulder. Savelyev rolled to the side of the clearing but got up again. He was looking down the black barrel of a sub-machine gun.

* * *

Polikarp Matveyevich Kruzhilin left the District Committee building without having placed his call to Novosibirsk. The groom, Yevsei Galanshin, was sweeping the wet leaves and cigarette butts from the ground in front of the porch.

"That was a good rain we just had. It's good for the wheat," Kruzhilin said.

"Warm rain means more grain. That's for sure," the old man replied. "But cross-eyed Peter's not much of an eater. They put porridge in his mouth and it all falls out."

"Why is that?"

"Because his mouth's just a hole in his head." Galanshin said, sat down on one of the porch steps and pulled out his tobacco pouch. "Half the grain that's harvested is ruined at the threshing sheds every year here and trampled into the ground by the horses. The people work hard and then go and ruin half the harvest." What he said next was unexpected. "Now, take you, for instance. All you do all day is poke around in those papers. Then Vera rattles them off on that contraption of hers, and you sit there pouring over them. I've been watching you. I walk around in the yard here and look in the windows, so I can see who's doing what."

Kruzhilin smiled.

"What's the connection between the grain that's lost and my papers?"

"Can't you see? Polipov here before you kept writing all sorts of frightening papers, too: hurry with the sowing, hurry with the mowing! I must have delivered tons of those papers to the collective farms! Well, the people were always on the run, trying to get everything done according to the paper schedules. And when you're running with a full pail of water, you're bound to splash out half of it, no matter what. I see you're going at the harvesting the same way. Hm? So's we'll be the first district in the region to finish the harvesting. Is that it? Polipov was always the first to report in."

"No, that's not the kind of papers I've been writing. We'll harvest the grain the peasant way, to make sure there are no losses."

"Time'll tell," the old man sounded doubtful.

As Kruzhilin walked towards his house he was thinking about Polipov. Indeed, the district had taken first place in the region when he had been the Party Secretary.

When Polikarp Matveyevich had been summoned to the Regional Committee and had agreed to go back to his old job, he thought that Polipov would be promoted, for he felt that would only be natural and just, since Polipov had joined the Party before the revolution and had been imprisoned during the tsarist regime time and again. Polipov, as well as Subbotin, the present Secretary of the Regional Committee, had been among those who had established Soviet power in Novonikolayevsk. Polipov had been caught by the Whiteguard security service during the Whiteguard Czech uprising, but had escaped from prison and had later been a commissar in a Red Army unit. After the Civil War he had done Party work in Novosibirsk and had then been elected First Secretary of the Shantara District Party Committee.

Kruzhilin was surprised to learn that Polipov was to remain in Shantara as Chairman of the Executive Committee. Polipov seemed offended, and if Kruzhilin did not feel sorry for him, he could at least understand him. This made him feel somehow guilty, as if it had been a whim of his to have Polipov removed in order that he himself could become First Secretary. On one occasion Kruzhilin had tried to broach the subject, but Polipov had cut him short.

"Forget it. I know you had nothing to do with it. I'm not that dumb," he had said.

Kruzhilin was to be still more surprised when he looked into the affairs of the district he had formerly been in charge of. The collective farms were actually in a state of penury. The unshared funds had not been replenished in ages, the cowsheds and stables were crumbling, and the people's earnings were very low.

In the past two or three years agriculture had been making good progress, and wages had increased throughout the country. People had become more cheerful, talkative and frank. Laughter and merriment were now frequent visitors in the villages. The country stores were doing a lively trade in cottons, bicycles, and, mainly, gramophones.

Here is Shantara, however, things were quite the opposite. The collective farmers greeted him silently and cautiously, and were reluctant to enter into conversation. There were no shortages of bicycles or gramophones here, as everywhere else.

"And this is supposed to be one of the best districts," Kruzhilin mused, becoming more and more disturbed.

He stayed over in Mikhailovka one night and spoke of the things that were troubling him, sharing these uneasy thoughts with Nazarov. The chairman of the collective farm listened to all he had to say, mumbled incoherently, so that Kruzhilin did not really know whether he was agreeing with him or not.

"What're you mumbling about, Pankrat?" Kruzhilin said sharply. "If there's something I don't understand, or if I'm wrong about something, come right out and give it to me straight."

"Straight, you say? Wild ducks fly straight. But they're stupid birds."

"Wait a minute, Pankrat. I've never known you to evade an issue before."

Nazarov was rising clumsily and nearly overturned his unfinished glass of tea in the process. He crossed the room, took his sheepskin coat off a peg and put it on. "Maybe a hare's a stupid animal, too," he continued, hunting around for his fur hat, "but it knows enough to backtrack. That

means life's taught it to. That's because a hare lives on the ground and doesn't fly around up there in the sky where it won't bump into anybody else."

Kruzhilin was staring at him in amazement. "You've changed, Pankrat."

"Well, this is the twenty-fourth year of Soviet power. It's about time we started changing." The old chairman's voice was dull and sad, and there was bitterness in it as well.

"So," Kruzhilin also rose. "Maybe that's why your farm is in a much better condition than the others? Because you've learned to backtrack?"

"No. It's not much to look at. Maybe the people here are little better off than our neighbors. Judging your way, that is. I mean, by the gramophones. I'd say people are buying them here, too."

These last sentences were uttered with a trace of mockery. He turned towards Kruzhilin and they stood thus, facing each other, with hardly any space between them, staring into each other's eyes.

"Why are you talking to me like this, Pankrat?"

"How do I know whether you're the man you used to be or not? Maybe life's broken you and you've become like Polipov?" Then something moved deep inside his eyes, he sat down on a stool and stared off into a corner. "If you've been burnt once, you'll be careful the next time. Forgive me, Polikarp."

"I have to work with Polipov, you know. What sort of a man is he?"

Nazarov was silent for a few moments and then sighed. "Who knows? As far as I can see, he's a mean customer, and not somebody you'd want to come across."

"In what way?"

"How the hell do I know!" Nazarov was immediately ashamed of his outburst and continued in a calmer voice. "You just look around. The collective farms in the region are all making out, but you'd think there was a plague in our district. The day Polipov became District Party Secretary was the day the plague began."

"You think it's all because of him?"

"A fish starts rotting from the head, as they say."

"But what about all the rest of you? What about you and the other farm chairmen? "

"What about us? We've been trained to carry out orders like soldiers. And we'd get our orders: sow the millet today and the barley tomorrow. Old Yevsei, your District Committee groom, would come riding up with instructions. The paper he'd bring would say: start sowing immediately. And maybe it would be raining or snowing that day, or maybe there'd even be a blizzard."

"Well? "

Nazarov shrugged. "Sometimes we did, putting seeds into cold ground. That's why our district was always the first in the region to complete the sowing. And what about the harvesting? If we'd fulfilled our delivery plan, Polipov would send us an additional quota, saying we had a lot left over and had to hand over the surplus for the food of the country. And we were always first in delivering our grain. We were the best district in the region! But what about the farm? Things were going from bad to worse here. There was nothing left over for the farmers. I'd take it for as long as I could and then not report a couple of hundred poods of grain. It would make me feel like a thief or something. Or else, I'd get mad as hell and report in that we'd finished the sowing when, actually the mud was still knee-high in the fields. Yes. And then I'd toss around at night with an ache in my heart, listening for the sound of Yakov Aleinikov's horse and buggy."

"So that's how it is! "

"What did you think? "

So that was what Polipov was like. Kruzhilin had been studying him these past six months. There did not seem to be anything out of the ordinary about him. True, he was a very reticent man, but fulfilled his present duties conscientiously, if anything. Kruzhilin lived in the same one-storey log house he had before he had moved away to Oirotiya. During his absence, however, the house had been shut away from view by a high green fence.

"Why did you shut yourself off behind a fence? " Kruzhilin asked Polipov, who now lived there, the very first day he was back. A truck stood by the porch. Old Yevsei, the watchman, and Polipov were going up and

down the frozen steps, carrying out mattresses, chairs and bundles of books, all of which were put into the back of the truck.

"It wasn't my idea. It was Aleinikov's orders," Polipov said as he tossed a bolster into the truck. "That's his business. He should know."

It was a frosty day. The glitter of the virgin snow was blinding. Polipov had on a sweater and fur hat and was so overheated that steam was rising from his body. He was loading his belongings hastily, in fact demonstratively, as if to show everyone how humble and submissive he was. "You shouldn't have done it, Pyotr Petrovich," Kruzhilin said.

"Done what? "

"Decided to move. My wife and I can live where the former Executive Committee Chairman used to. Or someplace else. My son's in the army, so there are only the two of us."

Polipov mopped his damp brow and tried to smile. "Oh, no. That's not according to protocol. I'm very pedantic about such things, even though it may sound funny."

The truck drove off. The empty house looked unwelcome and as if it had been pillaged. Kruzhilin closed the gate, went back inside and walked through the bare rooms. Bits of paper and cigarette butts were strewn over the dusty floors. "I'll have to have the fence taken down," he said to himself.

"Getting ready to move? " It was Aleinikov. Yakov was standing at the doorway, smiling. He had on a good leather coat with a fur collar and an old pair of flying boots.

"Listen, why'd you have this big fence put up to shut the house away from everybody? " Kruzhilin said.

"Me? That was Polipov's idea. Well, you get settled here." His eyes went to the locks on the door. "Actually, the place need freshing up. I'll tell you what. You stay at the hotel for a few more days." He went over to the telephone and cranked the handle twice. "Get me the communal manager, Katya. Yes, Malygin.... Malygin? Yes, it's me. Listen, the First Secretary's house has to be put in

shape. You've got two days to do the job."

The man whom Aleinikov had addressed as Malygin was saying something. Yakov was biting on his thin lower lip as he listened.

"No buts about it. I said two days, and I mean two days. That's all." He hung up the receiver. "Those guys'll always find an excuse. I hope you don't mind my butting in. Otherwise they'll drag it out."

"Tell them to take down the fence while you're at it."

"The fence? In winter?" Aleinikov smiled again.

"Yes. I guess you're right. All right, we'll put it off till spring."

Aleinikov wiped the smile off his face. "You're a hard man to please. If it's there, leave it be. There must have been a good reason for putting it up in the first place. Can't you understand?"

"Ah, Yakov!" Kruzhilin sighed after Aleinikov had gone. "I'm afraid we won't get along now, either."

Kruzhilin wandered about the empty house for about half an hour. He stopped for a long time in the small room that had once been his son Vasily's. The boy's bed had stood by the wall and the table at which he had done his homework by the window. This was where the shelf with his model tanks had been. Vasily had probably been in the first grade when he became fascinated by tanks. He made them from soft bread, cut them out of cardboard and wood. Then he lost all interest in tanks and became a model airplane bug, spending all his free time planing bits of wood which he fashioned into wings and fuselages for gliders and airplanes, covering the frames with tissue paper. That was back in Oirotiya. However, by the time he was in his senior year at secondary school he had lost all interest in aviation and no longer knew what he wanted to do. They had once spoken of it.

"I don't know what to devote my life to, Dad. I want it to be something very special. But my head's full of pink fuzz. I'll be called up soon. After I've done my stint I'll decide what I'm going to do. Maybe my brains'll clear while I'm in the army."

Such was the situation when he had left for service in the Red Army.

The next room had been Kruzhilin's study. He recalled how much he had liked to work here in the mornings. The windows faced the square and the simple memorial to the men and women who had given their lives for the establishment of Soviet power. It was a wooden obelisk painted dark red, the color of dried blood. There, in that common grave, lay the remains of many former members of his partisan detachment. In the winter mornings when the sun rose and if the windowpane wasn't frozen over, the star that crowned the obelisk cast a shadow that fell upon his desk. The obelisk was set in a small square with flower beds all around. In summer birds sang there in a many-voiced chorus.

In summer, too, the sun rose far to the east and so the shadow of the star did not fall upon his desk, but as soon as he opened the window the birds' voices would fill the room to overflowing, carried in by a fresh current of air. The birds would be singing, the poplars and maples would be touched by the morning breeze, and every leaf reflected the bright sun. Fleecy clouds drifted across the sky over the obelisk, making it seem that the earth itself was moving into the distant unknown, trailing the clouds in its wake.

Now all he could see by looking out the window was the dark-green fence, then the treetops, and above them the large wooden star. It was covered by hoarfrost and glittered in the winter sun. However, the high fence concealed the obelisk.

"Just wait! I'll have this fence down next summer!" Kruzhilin fumed, and his heart pounded. He turned on his heel and stamped out.

A sleigh loaded with spattered barrels of whitewash, crates and cans of paint was just entering the yard. Following the wagon was a group of men dressed in dirty quilted jackets. Walking in front of them like a commander was an impressive-looking man of about thirty wearing a yellow sheepskin coat. He hurried over to Kruzhilin, pulled his hand out of a fur mitten and thrust it at Kruzhilin as if it were a spear, saying,

"Are you Kruzhilin? The new Party Secretary? Glad to meet you. I'm Malygin." He turned to the group behind

him. "Come on, boys. We've no time to waste. I want the job done in two days flat." Then he turned back to Kruzhilin. "Don't you worry, Polikarp Matveyevich, we'll have everything done on time. My boys are fast operators."

"Do you mean they're not to be trusted?"

"No. I mean they're tops. Come on, get the stuff off the wagon! I'll have some more help coming in tomorrow morning. I'll take everyone off whatever job they're doing."

Malygin bustled about the sleigh, issuing orders. Kruzhilin looked at him with distaste and decided he was a pretty fast operator himself. Aloud he said,

"You seem to be very conscientious."

"Of course I am! That's my job. What colors do you want in the rooms?"

"I don't want you taking anyone off any other job."

"I s-see. But how about the deadline?"

"If you have the job done by the end of next week it'll suit me. And you can paint the walls whatever color you want to." He turned and walked out of the yard.

"I s-see."

Kruzhilin could feel Malygin's puzzled eyes on his back as the man tried to decide whose orders he was supposed to follow, the new Secretary's or Aleinikov's.

In the end, he followed Aleinikov's orders.

Such were Polikarp Matveyevich's thoughts as he crossed the grassy yard from the gate to the porch. All this flashed through his mind, but one thought blocked out the rest: "The fence has to come down! I'll call Malygin right away. I want them to start tearing it down tomorrow."

"Hurry, hurry!" his wife called, rushing out onto the porch.

"What's the matter, Tosya?"

"Ivan Mikhailovich is on the phone, calling from the Regional Committee."

Kruzhilin hurried into the room and picked up the receiver. "Hello, Ivan Mikhailovich. At last! I've been trying to get you all day. Who's coming to the bureau meeting?"

"I don't think anyone will." The voice in the receiver was distant and dull.

"What's the matter? Is something wrong? Ivan Mikhailovich! Can you hear me? "

"Yes, you don't have to shout. Are the bureau members there? "

"They're off today. Tomorrow they're going to the different collective farms. There've been some delays with the mowing. But what's the matter? "

"There's going to be an important official communiqué at 4 p.m. today. Tune in the radio."

"What? Did somebody die or ... or...." Kruzhilin suddenly felt the receiver weigh heavily in his hand. It began to slip in his sweaty palm and to keep from dropping it, he gripped it so tightly his knuckles turned white. The words came out hoarsely, "Do you mean to say that...."

"I can't say anything now. Listen to the broadcast. Phone me if you have to. All the Regional Committee members are here now. I suggest you summon all the bureau members and listen to the broadcast together. We'll decide what to do after. Good-bye."

There was a click in the receiver, but Kruzhilin did not hang it up. He did not even take it from his ear but stood thus, petrified, staring out the window at the treetops visible above the fence and at the star of the obelisk drifting over them. Suddenly a voice sobbed in the receiver.

"It's war, Polikarp Matveyevich. War."

"What? Who's this? " Kruzhilin started visibly.

"It's me, Katya. The telephone operator."

"How do you know? "

"My girlfriend told me. She's an operator in Moscow. They've known it there at the exchange since this morning. It's war. But how could it happen? " She began to sob again.

"Take it easy. Get hold of yourself. Hear me! " Kruzhilin raised his voice. "And not a word to anybody! Is that clear? "

"Yes. It's clear."

"Good for you. And now, Katya, I want you to be very calm and call all the members of the bureau. Find all

of them and tell them I want them to be at the District Committee at 4 p.m. sharp for an emergency meeting."

"All right," Her voice was nearly back to normal.

His wife came up to him softly. Her plump and faintly sagging face was alarmed. "What is it? What's the matter?" she whispered.

"I don't know, Tosya," he replied, still gazing out the window. "I think ... it's war."

Her eyes grew wide. She gasped, swayed, her hand flew to her heart, and she leaned against her husband. "But Vasily's there! What'll happen to him?"

"Now, now," he said, stroking her warm shoulder and feeling icy fingers grip his heart. But only for a moment.

* * *

The same icy fingers gripped his heart again an hour and a half later when Molotov's voice, sounding very strained, issued forth from the round black loudspeaker set in the corner of his office.

"Citizens of the Soviet Union! The Soviet Government and its head, Comrade Stalin, have entrusted me to make the following statement...."

However, no sooner had Molotov begun speaking than the chill left his heart. His body became light and weightless and his head became as clear as if he had had a nightmare and then, upon awakening, realized that it was all only a dream. Meanwhile, Molotov was saying, "At 4 a.m. this morning, without raising any claims or declaring war on the Soviet Union, German troops set upon our country and attacked our frontiers at many points; their warplanes bombed our cities—Zhitomir, Kiev, Sevastopol, Kaunas...."

Polikarp Matveyevich listened to the calm, measured words dropping from the loudspeaker into the stillness of the room, looked at each of the men in turn and said to himself, "This is war. How long will it last? A week? A month? Not more than a month, surely. We've learned something from the battles of Khasan and Khalkhin-Gol, and the Finnish Campaign. Now we know they were testing our strength. I can see that now, but Stalin and the

other members of the Government have known this for a long time. They weren't sitting around all this time. They've seen to it that the Red Army and the country are prepared. Yes, a month at the utmost."

He felt a bit dizzy. The heady surge of strength he had known in his youth rose up in him and he smiled. There would be a lot of work, more difficult and more tense than ever now.

When Molotov was through speaking military marches poured forth from the radio. Kruzhilin looked from one man to another. They were all frowning, trying to avoid each other's eyes, as if each felt somehow guilty. Polipov was sunk deep in an armchair beside the Secretary's desk. He kept rapping his fingers on the leather armrest and wiping his damp forehead. Opposite him was Major Grigoryev, the military commissar, a gray-haired man of about fifty, who had been in the fighting at Khasan and in the Finnish swamps. He seemed to be clenching his teeth with all his might, because tight muscles bunched under his clean-shaven cheeks. He was staring at the floor between his legs. The sunbeams streaming through the window lit up his gray hair and the crimson insignia on his collartabs.

Aleinikov was not a member of the bureau, for at the time Kruzhilin had agreed to return to Shantara he had especially requested, when at the Regional Party Committee, that Aleinikov not be included in the new District Committee bureau. However, he was now present also, as Polikarp Matveyevich had phoned him and asked him to come. He stood again by the window, as he had earlier that morning, looking out at the road.

From where he sat Kruzhilin reached out and switched off the radio. The sudden silence was deafening. "Well, comrades," he said. After short pause he smiled wryly and continued, "I was talking to our old groom today about the rain and the harvest. He said that there'd be more grain after the good rain we've had, but that cross-eyed Peter wasn't much of an eater. I asked him what he meant, and he said that his mouth was just a hole in his head."

Polipov glanced at him from under his knitted brows and shrugged his plump shoulders. The others also regarded the Secretary with amazement.

Kruzhilin rose. He did not sense that his voice had become solemn when he said, "We'll have to cut our Sunday short. I propose we hold a bureau meeting now. Our first wartime bureau meeting. All of you realize that from now on, from this minute on, each of us is faced with pressing new tasks, brought about by the new situation. The harvest is our chief concern now. Let's go over our schedules again. The harvesting must be completed as quickly as possible. This is obvious. And, what's most important, every last grain and kernel must be harvested. I believe that grain losses during harvesting is the weakest link in our district. Pull your chairs closer, comrades. And you stay on, Yakov Nikolayevich." Kruzhilin stood there, listening to the men scrape their chairs across the floor as they came to sit around the long table. Amidst the noise he was suddenly brought up short by the remembered sound of his wife's alarmed cry, "But what about Vasily? What will happen to him now?"

* * *

This being a Sunday, the Shantara machine and tractor station was deserted.

Anikei Yelizarov and Kirian Iniutin's tractors stood side by side. Their motors were half-dismantled. The two men were poking about in the iron insides with their grimy hands. Iniutin was glum. Yelizarov, a man of about thirty with a large nose and cheeks that were of a tubercular, bright-red hue, kept cursing foully.

"What are you doing? Can't you see the lining's burnt out? Throw it away. And this bolt, too. The threading's worn. Don't put it back in. And what are you looking at me goggle-eyed for? Go thread a new one. And what's the matter with you, Kirian? Did your brains get soft from drinking? Who ever taught you to bend a pin like that? It'll fly out as soon as you start rolling. What a pair of workers, damn you," Fyodor grumbled as he pushed now one and now the other out of the way to show them how to do it properly. His hands and arms up to the elbows were also covered with axle grease.

When the storm broke the three of them sought shelter inside the repair shop. Fyodor stretched out on the workbench. Yelizarov sat down on an empty lubricant grease can and lit a cigarette. Iniutin stood by the dirty window and gazed out at the rain.

"You're as sour as week-old milk. What's the matter? Are you feeling blue, because you're sober this morning? When'll you quit drinking? "

"Why don't you stop boozing instead of acting so smart? " Kirian muttered without turning his head.

"You're right there. I should lay off. But vodka's not what's killing me. It's the stink of gasoline that'll send me to an early grave. I've got to get out of here." Yelizarov listened to the rain outside and blinked his long, girlish lashes. "And I will, sure as anything. What's keeping me here? Sure, the wages are good. You're here because you have to feed a big family, Fyodor. But I don't. There's only my wife Nina and me. Then again, it seems to me you like to be in the limelight. I personally couldn't care less."

"Watch your tongue! " Savelyev snapped.

"What's the matter? Don't you like what I'm saying? Then why'd you promise to make me and Kirian shock workers at the meeting last spring? And why've you been wasting so much time on us this past year and a half? "

"I'll see that you're up front! See if I don't in another year or two."

"No, you won't. And you know it damn well. But the chief believed you and gave you a new combine straight off. He assigned you to the best fields, and you earned more money and got more wheat in payment than anyone else here. And now you've set your sights on the best fields on the Red Wheat Collective Farm. They say Nazarov's fields will bring in the best harvest this year. Don't think we're blind. We know what's going on."

Fyodor swung his legs over the side of the workbench. His heavy eyebrows twitched. "My! Don't you have good eyes! So that's why you've been poking around and sniffing about."

Yelizarov's fine eyes became apprehensive.

"Everybody tries to make out. What's all this talk

about your health? You're as healthy as an ox," Fyodor said.

"What are you getting at? "

When the rain ended they went out and worked on in silence until four o'clock.

"Let's call it a day," Fyodor finally said and began washing the grease off his hands and forearms in a small pail of gasoline.

A girl in a kerchief ran across the yard, waved both hands, shouted and raced off to the office where a group of people was standing around outside.

"What's the matter? " Fyodor wondered aloud as he wiped his hands on an old rag. "Let's go over and see what's up."

There were about a dozen people crowding around the open window of the director's office. There were people inside the office as well. The loudspeaker had been set on the windowsill, and a low-pitched voice, speaking unhurriedly was saying that that morning German troops had crossed a border in many places and had bombed some cities, but Fyodor could not make out the names, since at that very moment a woman inside the office began wailing so loudly she drowned out the voice coming over the radio.

"What's the matter? Who's speaking? "

"Be quiet! It's Molotov."

"What happened? "

"It's war, that's what! "

The woman inside was either calmed or led off. In the silence that followed the words came loud and clear.

"...Now, when the attack on the Soviet Union has been perpetrated, the Soviet Government has ordered our troops to rebuff the piratic attack and to expel the German troops from the territory of our Motherland."

Fyodor's large, work-hardened fingers that reeked of gasoline tugged at his black moustache. Yelizarov kept turning his shaggy head this way and that and blinking helplessly. He was the only one in the crowd who did not stand still but went from one window to another and circled the crowd restlessly. Kirian Iniutin sat down on the rain-freshened grass, lowered his head and remained thus

until the sound of a military march filled the clear, dry and hot air.

* * *

Ivan did not notice the moment at which Pankrat had left, for he stood by the door, pressing his son's hot head to his chest. Volodya was badly in need of a haircut. His thick hair was coarse, dusty and smelled of the wind and sage. There was a tight knot deep inside Ivan, and he stood there, waiting for the pain to subside. Finally, he moved away from his son, rummaged in his haversack and came up with a can of sardines.

"What's that?" Volodya said.

"A present for you."

The boy fingered the can, not knowing what to do.

"It's canned sardines. Didn't you ever see a can before?"

"Nope."

Ivan opened the can and set it on the table. The boy put a fish into his mouth gingerly and then fell to it. Ivan sat opposite, watching him, and once again there a great, swelling moan rose up inside of him, and he turned away to the window. A calf with a white forehead was sniffing around in the weeds outside.

"That's our calf," Volodya said proudly. "Uncle Pankrat gave it to us."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when his cow had a calf he gave it to us and said when it grew up we'd have a cow of our own." He was silent for a few moments and then added, "You're not an enemy of the people any more now, are you?"

"Who said I was?"

"The boys kept jeering at me. They said you were."

"Oh."

"Sure. When I told Ma she said, 'Don't you believe a word of it,' but it made her cry at night. I know. I heard her. And Uncle Pankrat said I shouldn't believe it, either."

Ivan gazed out of the window for a long moment of silence. "They were right, your Ma and Uncle Pankrat."

"I know you're no enemy. That's for sure. But...."

"But what?"

"But why'd they put you in jail then?"

Ivan pressed his son's head to his chest again and stroked his tangled hair. "Do you think I know, son? Never mind. You'll understand when you're bigger."

"How come, if you don't?"

Ivan walked over to the wooden bed which creaked when he sat down on it. He spoke to his thirteen-year-old son as he would to a grown man. "Well, it's like this. Life's so confusing that while you're thrashing about in it you can't really get a good idea of what's going on. But when you're grown up you'll be sort of looking at it from a distance, and you'll be able to get a good view, and that'll make things clear."

Volodya puckered his brow as he tried to follow his father's words. His gray eyes lost their childish expression. "Oh!" he suddenly said, jumped up and snatched his whip. "Here I am sitting around, while the mowers are waiting for their bread. Uncle Pankrat'll give me hell!" And off he went.

Ivan wandered about the room, then took off his shoes and lay down. It was so strange to be lying there alone in the stillness on a soft, clean bed. The stillness, the high wooden bedstead and mattress, the blue pillows, the large, freshly-whitewashed brick oven, the clean pane in the window and the streams of sunshine pouring through it—all seemed unreal and impossible. He could not understand how he had come to find himself in such surroundings and could not believe that he could lie on this bed for as long as he pleased, bathing in the stillness, the cleanliness and the quietude.

"Ivan! Iva-aan!" his wife's scream cut across his consciousness, and he realized he had dozed off. He came to with a start, rose up and then sat up on the bed, wondering whether he had not imagined it.

He shook his head to dispell the scream, but it continued, because the door flew open and Agata burst into the room. Her face was contorted.

"Oh, Ivan!" she wailed and fell to her knees, burying her head in his lap as her shoulders heaved.

"What is it? What's the matter?" he demanded, as fear clutched his heart.

"It's war, Ivan. War!" She raised her face. Her eyes had become two dark, murky pools and tears poured out of them, coursing down her ashen, flabby, instantly-aged cheeks that had been flushed and rosy but so recently.

* *

Semyon and Vera were crossing the steppe to the village. It was late. The Gromotukha, having gurgled loudly all day, now flowed on beside them lazily, and the setting sun tinted it copper and gold.

Kolya Iniutin, and Semyon's brothers Dima and Andrei had already gone home.

Every now and then Vera would stop and say, "Once more, Semyon," and Semyon would kiss her. Vera's hot arms would entwine his neck as she pressed hard against him.

"There's no stopping you."

"I know. I'm greedy. My lips hurt, but I can't stop. You'll see how I'll love you, Semyon! All the boys'll envy you."

Some boys and girls were having fun on the river bank outside the village. A man in a white shirt with his sleeves rolled up was sitting on a flat stone strumming a guitar.

"That looks like Manya Ogorodnikova. Wait. I'll only be a minute. She's making me a dress."

Vera ran towards the river and stood there, talking to Manya. She was a plump, round-faced girl with large breasts, and Semyon had noticed that she herself was ashamed of their size.

He stood there waiting for Vera for a few minutes and then walked slowly over to the group. The man with the guitar began to sing as if his heart were breaking,

*The years were passing, I was getting handsome,
I started going out with girls and drinking booze.
"You'll be a thief, a thief just like your dad, son,"
My mother wept, and thus I stood, accused.*

"It's Makar Kaftanov!" Semyon realized and wanted to turn away, but Makar had spotted him. His smouldering

eyes became narrow slits and he said,

"Ah, my dear little nephew! Hello, boy! "

Semyon said nothing.

"So you don't want to have anything to do with me? I guess I'll survive."

The breeze ruffled Makar's fine silk shirt. A watch gleamed on his bony wrist. He had on a pair of expensive, square-toed leather boots that were covered with mud.

"He's all dressed up, and he doesn't even care if he's ruined his boots," Semyon was thinking.

A fiery red-head whom Semyon had never seen before went over to Makar, leaned on his shoulder brazenly and whispered in his ear.

"Get lost," Makar said with disgust and shrugged her off.

Semyon noticed that she was wearing the same kind of wristwatch as Makar and was positive they were stolen.

"I remember when you were just this big, Semyon. And then this big, and then this big." Makar was showing everyone how small Semyon had been. "And look at how big you are now."

"Let's go, Vera," Semyon said.

Makar brought his fingers down on the strings again.

A lad of barely seventeen was I, boys....

He cut the song short and said, "Drop in sometimes, Semyon. We'll see what life's all about."

"What kind of life? Prison life? That's something I've never been interested in."

"Oho! Does your mother know I'm back? "

"How should I know? "

"Well, well. Say hello to her for me." Makar smiled and turned away.

Vera and Semyon walked back to the village in silence, accompanied by the sounds of Makar's endless prison songs which drifted in from the river bank.

*As time marched on, days, weeks and months,
and long, long years,
All that my mother feared has come to pass...*

Semyon spat into the dusty road in disgust.

"Sure," Vera mused aloud. "But he has a swell wrist-watch, and did you notice? He gave his girlfriend one, too."

"What a thing to envy! " Semyon quickened his step.

The sun had set. The village streets were deserted, but this did not surprise either of them, since only the main street of Shantara was alive in the evenings, especially on Sundays.

However, when they reached the High Road they found it was deserted, too. The street under the poplars was dark and gloomy. Semyon was still riled by his recent encounter and paid no attention to this at first, but then he stopped short and said, "That's funny. Don't you have a funny feeling? "

"About what? " Vera, too, was brought back to the present.

"As if the place is dead."

"Yes. But I think I can hear voices."

They headed quickly towards a two-story, red-brick building. There was a crowd outside. This was the local draft board. An old man was sitting on the bottom step of the high wooden porch and saying, as he sucked on his pipe,

"Sure, there's all kind of medicines now, but as far as your eye-o-dine goes, there's something much better. If you mix dirt and gunpowder it'll do a much better job than any old eye-o-dine."

"That's a lot of hogwash," a young boy protested.

"That's what you think! " The old man rose quickly and drew up his shirt, baring his ink-blue side. "Here, have a look. There was a hole here bigger'n your fist. That was back in '15. We were just going to attack, and I hadn't run more'n eight yards when something hit me in the side. I guessed it was a piece of shrapnel, and when I looked down, sure enough, my side was smoking. It knocked me over. Then a nurse came along, hoisted me onto her back and dragged me off to safety. You should have seen all that eye-o-dine they poured into me! But the damn thing just wouldn't heal. Well, I said to myself, those doctors'll soon have me rotting clear through if I don't do something

about it myself. So I got me some gunpowder and a handful of dirt from the hospital garden and mixed it up with water."

"Boiled water?" the same fellow inquired.

"Shut up! You think it's funny, don't you? But here's my side to prove it." The old man pulled up his shirt again. "Well, I packed it into the hole, tied it up tight, and a week later all that was left was this here blue scar. And you want to know whether it was boiled water!" He sat down on the step in a huff.

"Did it sting?" a middle-aged man asked, trying not to laugh.

The old man had not noticed the sarcasm in his voice and replied in all seriousness, "That it did." Then he turned to the young boy and said, "Go on and laugh, but mind the perscripshun: you take a handful of dirt, have a handful of gunpowder and half a mug of water. You never can tell, you might be sent off to war tomorrow."

"What are you talking about? What war?" Semyon demanded.

"What war? Wake up. Where've you been?"

Vera suddenly cried out. Her sharp fingers dug into his shoulder and she began to breathe rapidly.

"Wait a minute!" He tried to brush her hands away. "Tell me what...."

Just then Kolya Iniutin appeared from the gloom and dragged him off, talking excitedly all the while. "It's war with the Germans, Semyon. The Germans started a war while we were fishing. I've been home. My ma's praying, and my pa's walking back and forth, up and down the room, not saying anything. I saw your dad when I looked across the fence. He looks pretty mad, too. What's going to happen now?"

"You'll be called up, Semyon!" Vera cried and clutched his shoulder again.

"Hm. Wait till it happens. Don't cry beforehand."

"He's right. I always said she was silly," Kolya said and sniffled.

"All right, let's go home."

When Semyon entered the house he saw his father sitting by the open window as he had been that morning.

He was smoking and blowing the smoke out into the darkness. His mother was preparing supper, trying not to rattle the dishes. Dima and Andrei were huddled in a corner, looking at their parents with frightened eyes. The small pail with their catch stood on a bench by the door, forgotten, of no interest to anyone now.

"Is it really war?" Semyon asked.

"Let's eat," his father said, ignoring the question and flicked his butt out the window.

No one said a word all through the meal. When they were through Semyon went outside and looked up at the bright stars and the clear sky. "How can people fight a war at night?" It was a strange thought. Semyon knew it was stupid, but no other thoughts came to him.

The wattle fence swayed and creaked. He grimaced, thinking it was Vera, for he did not feel like talking to her or to anyone else, for that matter. It was Kolya Iniutin again.

"Listen, do you think I can fool the draft board?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll say I'm eighteen. I can pass for eighteen, can't I?"

"Oh, shut up!" Semyon muttered, sat down on the bench sunk in the ground by the house and stared off into the darkness.

"I'll say I lost my birth certificate. And they'll have no way of checking, will they? It's only a difference of three years anyway. Huh, Semyon?"

Semyon said nothing. His thoughts were far away, and he seemed not to have heard Kolya at all. After a while he stood up and went back indoors.

* * *

When darkness fell Anikei Yelizarov stealthily approached a long log house surrounded by maples and sneaked up the porch that was lit by a small bulb. He entered the long, narrow corridor. There was a man in uniform sitting at a desk behind a dividing counter.

"The chief wanted to see me. My name's Yelizarov."

"You mean Yakov Nikolayevich wants to see you?"

"Yes."

To the right and left of the man on duty was a corridor as wide as a street. It was lined by black padded doors. A single door at the very end of the corridor was padded with red leather. Yelizarov approached and opened the door.

Aleinikov was seated at a large desk. He was busy writing. Yelizarov coughed softly, covering his mouth with his gasoline-drenched fist.

"Well? What is it? "

"I phoned for an appointment. It's a personal matter."

There was a large antique wall clock of black oak on the wall. Its hands were of filigreed brass. The round pendulum-tongue swayed back and forth lazily behind the heavy patterned glass. Aleinikov stared at the pendulum for some time, as if he was waiting for it to stop.

"How was the news about the war taken at the machine and tractor station? " he inquired at length.

"Well, uh, it's hard to say. Everyone's stunned."

"What are they saying? "

"Nothing special so far. I'd have heard. I keep my ears open. No one's said anything yet."

Aleinikov grimaced. "Well? Why'd you come? I'm busy."

"It'll only take a minute. I've a request. Since this is wartime now, every man should do what he can for his country. I'll probably be deferred, because I've probably got TB. And driving a tractor is pretty near killing me."

"Well? " Yelizarov had long since evoked nothing but contempt in Aleinikov.

"Well, I've been thinking about applying for a job in the militia. I can still manage that kind of a job. And besides, I can always keep you informed about whatever you might like to know about."

"Why'd you come to see me? " Aleinikov demanded irritably. "Go see the chief of militia. If he needs another man he may take you on."

"I was just wondering whether you might put in a good word for me."

Aleinikov suddenly felt as if he were choking. His

throat constricted. He spoke quickly, in order to get rid of the man, "All right, I will. Go on. I'm busy."

* * *

Manya Ogorodnikova had known Makar ever since she was a girl. Whenever he was in Shantara he would drop in to see her stepfather, but always at night, and the two of them would drink vodka and speak in an undertone.

"Why do you have him here, Pa? And drink with him? Everybody says he's a thief," Manya had said one day.

"Shush!" Her stepfather's usually stern eyes glanced at her in such a way it sent chills down her spine. However, he relaxed immediately and added, "I know he's a thief, but he has a good heart. I've been trying to get him to give up his old ways and put some sense into him. There's a lot of good jobs a man can do. Take me, now. I make boots. The job doesn't call for a lot of brains, but it makes people happy."

"How'd he get to be a thief?"

"Who knows? There's still a lot of evil and injustice in the world. And I guess Makar got pretty mad at everybody about something. You're too young to understand, because everything seems rosy when you're young. But you'll understand when you'll get bigger."

He was probably right in one respect: there was indeed so much injustice in the world. She had come to understand this after her stepfather had been arrested. Manya was not frightened by the fact, but it had left her crushed and sapped of all strength. Why had he been arrested? What had he done?

No one she knew could explain this to her. In fact, their behavior was very strange. Some pitied her, others were surprised and curious, while still others looked upon her with fear and distaste. But all avoided her. In the course of but a single week Manya found herself living in a vacuum.

The night her stepfather had been arrested he had tried to console her by saying that she was grown-up and had a

roof over her head. He had also said that if a good man came her way she should marry him.

Indeed, although the cottage was very small, it was now hers. And Manya was indeed a grown girl. She had turned seventeen that summer. Her stepfather was arrested the day after the last class of her senior year. But how could she think of getting married when even Lenya Gvozdev, her classmate, had turned away from her demonstratively at the graduation ceremony, when friends and relatives had applauded as they were given their school-leaving certificates? He had said,

"Your dad sure was a snake-in-the-grass. And there's a strong whiff of counter-revolution about you, too. I don't want to get tainted."

He had large lips and dark brows, and was four years older than she, having been left back innumerable times. However, he was not at all depressed by the fact that he was the worst pupil in the school. On the contrary, he was always cheerful and smug. If a teacher would try to shame him for being lazy and lax in his studies, his chestnut eyes, the color of a horse's, would sparkle and he'd say, "Mendeleev was no good in school, either, but he invented the periodic table of the elements. Just give me time. I'll invent something, too."

Gvozdev was very popular with the girls, but for some reason or other he had chosen Manya that spring. He probably had a lot of experience, because the very first evening he saw her home, he got her up against a wall, kissed her harshly and put his hand down her blouse.

"Stop it! I'll scream!" she gasped.

"Don't be stupid." He let her go. "I just wanted to see what kind of a girl you are."

"You can try it on somebody else."

"I'm not going to marry anybody else."

"Quit lying!"

"I'm not lying. All right, let's go."

He saw her home often after that. They studied for their exams together, and Manya did not wriggle out of his embrace any more, did not push his hand away when he unbuttoned her blouse. She would turn crimson, hide her flaming face and whisper,

"Don't. Shame on you!"

"You good girls give a fellow a hard time. All right, we'll get married as soon as we graduate. And I'm going to this year for sure. But I'm afraid I'll be called up. I've had so many deferments. Will you wait for me?"

"Why, I won't even look at anybody else."

And then, at their graduation party, the earth gave way under her. She could barely hear her name being called from the podium. Manya was not greeted with applause like her classmates had been, and the principal handed her her certificate without saying a word. She dashed out of the school house in a state of hysteria and ran down the dark street. All she remembered of that evening were the weird, menacing shadows of the trees that lined the street and had tried to block her way, and the stars rolling above overhead like peas in a pan. Once home, she locked and bolted the door, threw herself face down on her bed and lay there till morning. In the morning she said to herself, "No, Pa's no enemy. It's all a terrible mistake. And Lenya's a skunk. I'm glad I found out what a miserable, stupid person he is."

For a whole year after she tried to live as inconspicuously as a mouse, selling her stepfather's clothes and using the money for food. Then she got a job in a dress-making shop and learned to make patterns and sew. She saved up until she had enough money to buy a second-hand sewing machine. However, she was afraid to take in any private sewing and made her own clothes instead. Sometimes, for old time's sake, she would make a dress for her friend Vera Iniutina. On the whole, Manya could not complain about her new life.

That day Manya had pottered about the house until noon, stopping every now and then to sit by the open window and think about her encounter with Lenya Gvozdev the previous day. She felt no emotion at all.

"Are you married yet?" he had asked and his chestnut eyes had flashed. He had recently returned from having served his stint in the army and was taller and more handsome than ever. He was now a truck driver.

"No, I've been waiting for you," she had replied and walked on.

She felt like going for a swim, and so she locked the door and went down to the river. As she was passing Lusha Kashkarova's house she saw Makar Kaftanov. His trousers had a sharp crease, his leather boots shone brilliantly, he had on a white shirt and was carrying a guitar. He opened the gate.

"Oh!" Manya gasped and backed away.

Makar's dark eyes sized her up and he whistled. "Boy, you've sure grown up quick. You don't have to run away. I don't bite. Remember me?"

"You're Makar Kaftanov."

"Right," he smiled.

She stood there, not knowing what to say or do. "Where'd you come from?" No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she bit her tongue. What a question to ask! There was only one place he could have come from.

"From a health resort, dearie," he said and smiled again. "Your dad sends his regards."

"Is he alive? I mean, when'd you see him last?"

"Yes, he is." The smile was still playing on his face. "Why shouldn't he be?" He was staring at her plump, bare arms and at her large, heavy breasts. She became still more embarrassed. The blood rushed to her face.

"Uh, how is he?" she mumbled.

"I've no time to talk now, dearie. Later, maybe." He walked off down the street and turned into a lane.

Manya stood there for a few moments and then continued on slowly towards the river. She was very shy of her plumpness and so always bathed by herself away from the others. After she had swum about she lay on the hot stones until sundown, turning from her stomach to her back, thinking about her stepfather and watching the clear water lap at the pebbles on the bank. When the sun began to set she started back home.

Manya spotted Makar again on the bank near the village. A group of boys and girls were standing around, listening to him strum his guitar. Lenya Gvozdev was one of the group.

"Those are keen songs. They really touch you," he was saying to Makar. "Sing the one about the burglar." Then,

noticing Manya, he ran over to her, grabbed her hand and exclaimed, "Hey! Long time no see! Come on over and join us!"

"Leave me alone. Don't touch me! "

Everyone looked at her. Makar did, too.

"Lay off," Makar said softly.

Lenya blinked in surprise. He looked from Makar to Manya and back again, drawled, "Oh!" and let go of her hand.

Just then Vera and Semyon came up from the steppe. Vera asked Manya to finish her dress as quickly as possible, and Manya promised to. Then Vera and Semyon walked on. Manya stood there, listening to Makar singing for another ten minutes or so, and then followed them.

When she reached the village she heard the news: war had broken out. It neither frightened nor surprised her. It occurred to her that Lenya Gvozdev would also be called up and that he might be killed. "I won't be a bit sorry. It'll serve him right," she was thinking bitterly. Her wrist still burned where he had gripped it.

At home she undressed and put on a light cotton housecoat. Then she opened the window wide, lay down on her bed and remained thus until it got dark, staring up at the ceiling and thinking about war.

She imagined Lenya Gvozdev lying on the ground all bloody and wounded, stretching his arms towards the army nurses who looked just like the ones she had seen in a recent movie. They all passed by him and didn't even look in his direction. It was only right. He deserved to die. Then she imagined she was one of the nurses. She came over to him. No one else had, but she did. She bandaged his wound and dragged him off to a ravine, to where the tents with red crosses on their sides were. There at the field hospital he said, "Thanks. You saved my life. I'm definitely going to marry you now." And she smiled disdainfully and replied, "Oh, joy! Well, I've saved your life, but I want you to know I hate you worse than poison." Gvozdev tried to smile. Despite his wound, he stood up, grabbed her hand as he had just a short time before, and threw her to the floor. Then his heavy body fell on top of her and his sour liquor breath filled her nostrils. She want-

ed to wrench free but could not. She wanted to scream, but the scream stuck in her throat.

She did not know whether what happened after was part of a nightmare or did actually happen. Someone was really kneading her body, holding a hot hand over her mouth, pressing her head into the pillow, while his other hand passed quickly over her naked limbs.

"Let me go, Lenya! Don't you dare!" she cried in a choked voice.

"I'm not Lenya, stupid!" a voice said and the sound of it made her heart seem to burst, as from a raging fever, while something exploded and then went out in back of her tightly-shut eyes.

When her mind cleared the first thing she sensed was strong tobacco smoke. The room was plunged in darkness. She could see Makar Kaftanov's dishevelled head silhouetted against a strip of moonlight. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, smoking, and whenever he dragged on his cigarette the tip of his blunt nose seemed to turn copper from the red tip of it.

She felt so broken up, so crushed. Someplace deep inside, where her heart was, she hurt and seemed to be bleeding.

"Why'd you leave your window wide open at night, dearie?" Makar said as he stuck his hand into his shirt and scratched his chest.

Manya kept staring at the tip of his nose. It was coal-red one minute and went out the next. She turned her head to the wall slowly and began to sob as if her heart would break.

"Well, Manya, this is how things are," Makar began, ignoring her tears and dropping each word steadily, as if he were driving nails into a hard, resisting surface. "Your stepfather's dead. He was killed by dogs when he tried to escape. Shed no tears for him. He wasn't a shoemaker at all. And his name wasn't Ogorodnikov. He was Mikhail Kosorotov. He served in the Whiteguard army in times not too far removed. And he served well. He was a whiz at questioning prisoners. Afterwards, he did a lot of good deeds after that. There's no need your knowing about them. But life's a funny thing, as they say. Now I'll look

after you. You'll have all the money and everything else you want. There's only two things you'll have to do: sleep with me now and then, and keep your mouth shut. Nobody is to ever find out about my hideaway here. Otherwise, I'll pluck out your eyes and hang them around your neck instead of beads."

She barely understood what he was saying. She was indifferent to everything now. She didn't care who her stepfather had been, who Makar was, or what he had just done to her. She had stopped sobbing and was lying there quietly, thinking about the new clothes line in the pantry. It was strong enough to hold up under the weight of her body.

* * *

The first night of war in Shantara was still and balmy. Each person had accepted the news in his own way: one silently and sullenly, another helplessly, a third fearfully. Many of the women had begun wailing and sobbing at the news, as if their sons and husbands were going to be sent off to war that very moment.

After the first shock was over and people were able to think calmly once again, they began to discuss what had happened. They discussed things from every angle.

Was this really war, or was it just a provocation on the part of the Germans? If it really was war, would there be a total mobilization, or would the regular army be able to defeat the Germans? If there was to be a total mobilization, what age groups would be called up first? If many age groups were called up at once, how would they manage the harvesting?

They spoke of past wars, they recalled past battles, and the men who had been killed in these battles, and those who had returned home crippled and maimed. The local experts compared the fighting qualities of the German, Finnish and Japanese soldiers. They talked on and on, discussing everything, and all the while the same question was mirrored on every face: what did the future hold? For all their talk and all their discussions would not change a thing.

The days in June are the longest in the year, but the sun only sets at ten o'clock and the sky is still light at eleven. Hardly anyone in Shantara ever put on a light in June, but this night the pale yellow windows shone on into the small hours in every house.

At last the large village settled down to sleep. The trees, like black motionless clouds that had descended upon the earth, were engulfed by the silence and darkness.

In one house alone was there no talk of anything that evening. This was Fyodor Savelyev's house. The children went off to bed without their usual noise and fuss. Anna made the bed for her husband and herself and lay down in silence, too. Fyodor did not get undressed, but paced up and down. After a while he said,

"They say your brother Makar's shown up again."

Anna lay there without moving, staring off into space. She did not reply. Her eyes did not even blink.

"All right, go to sleep. I'll go out for a smoke."

"Oh, Lord!" Anna suddenly cried, sitting up and throwing off the blanket. "I wish they'd call you up! I wish you get killed there!"

For a few seconds they glared at each other. One of Fyodor's eyebrows twitched, while the other rose sharply, then dropped.

Anna's gray eyes glittered in the electric light and seemed glassy. Something was bursting inside her breast.

"Well! This is a rather sudden confession, isn't it?"

"You're lying! You're lying! You're lying!" she screamed three times in a row. "You're lying to yourself." She fell face down into the pillows and began to sob like a child. Fyodor smiled bitterly and walked out.

The stars were burning brightly overhead, as they had the previous night, and the night before that, and as far back as the beginning of time. The Milky Way streaked across the sky, higher or lower—it was difficult to tell which—than the stars, over Shantara, rushing off into the Unknown.

Lying on the ground on his spread jacket amidst the sunflowers, listening to the Gromotushka gurgling as it flowed between low, grassy banks, Fyodor had to admit that he had been lying to himself and that there was noth-

ing unexpected in Anna's accusation. "What if I leave her?"

The thought came as easily to him as if he were deciding what to do about a trifling matter. "It'll be hard to explain to Andrei and Dima. Semyon doesn't count. But what'll I tell Andrei and Dima? And now there's this war."

Fyodor winced, although the news of the outbreak of war had not especially upset him. He felt it would not develop into a real war and that the German units that had crossed the border would be kicked back out within the next few days. At any rate, it wouldn't last longer than the Finnish Campaign had.

Cool air from the river wafted towards him. "I'll catch cold lying here," he muttered to himself. "What's taking Anfisa so long?"

The thought of her brought a smile to his lips. What a woman! That's whom he should have married in the first place. The years had not made her older. In fact, she had become sweeter, like a watermelon, with the passing of time. And how passionate she was! Anna was no match for her, had never been, not even in her prime. How many times had he been drained completely, had Anfisa sapped him of all strength and fire so that he was dizzy from the emptiness he felt inside, yet still, she wanted more. Kirian had beaten her savagely, especially when they had all lived in Mikhailovka, but she seemed to be above it. She had never even complained to him about it.

Fyodor had once questioned her, "How can you take it? He's like a wild animal when he's drunk."

"Well, I do. What else can I do?" She had replied simply and without taking offence.

"Does he make you cry?" It was a stupid question.

"If he hurts me bad I just grit my teeth and keep saying to myself: it's on account of you, Fyodor, on account of you."

Fyodor was stunned. "What kind of crazy love is that?"

"I don't know. That's just how it is."

The Gromotushka gurgled on.

"Hm! She says she hopes I'm called up and sent off to

war and killed," Fyodor peevishly repeated Anna's words to himself. "I should get a divorce and marry Anfisa. She'll leave Kirian the minute I ask her."

He heard a rustling in the Iniutins' garden and the sound of crunching potatoe vines. Someone came over to the fence and touched it.

"Fyodor! " Anfisa called softly.

"Here I am. Climb over."

The wattle fence creaked. Just then Kirian called out from his porch.

"Who's there? "

Anfisa jumped back into her garden. "It's me."

"What are you doing there? "

"My legs sting. I walked into some nettles today, and I want to cool them in the stream. I can't fall asleep from the stinging. Why'd you wake up? "

"What an actress you are," Fyodor marvelled to himself. "You made up that story about the nettles in a flash. Oh, you women are more cunning than the devil! "

"Go on and cool them off. I'll have a smoke while you do."

Anfisa splashed around in the stream for a few minutes. Then Fyodor heard her long skirt swish over the garden rows as she went back to her house. The door was closed and the bolt clanged.

"Has Kirian guessed? " Fyodor wondered as he rose from the ground. "I bet he did this morning, otherwise he wouldn't have yapped at her like that."

* * *

As Anfisa had bathed her feet in the stream she had feverishly gone over the scene that would surely follow: Kirian would shove her into the shed and beat her black and blue like he had so many times before.

However, he did not push her towards the shed, did not even say a word. He went into the house in silence, lay down on the bed and moved over to the wall, making room for her.

"He doesn't suspect anything," she heaved a sigh of

relief inwardly, pressed her head against her husband's warm shoulder and dozed off. Then she awoke with a start and raised her head. Kirian was wide awake. His eyes shone in the darkness. "What's the matter? Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Who was it out there in the sunflowers? It wasn't Fyodor waiting for you by any chance, was it?"

"Kirian!" She rose up on her elbow.

"You don't have to put on an act for me. I know it was him."

Fear gripped her heart for a moment. Then she fell back on her pillow and sobbed, "Yes, it was him! It was him! Go on, beat me! Drag me off to the shed! Don't worry, I won't scream. So the neighbors won't hear."

"Be quiet. You'll wake up the kids."

There was something very unusual in his voice, something so calm it was frightening. Anfisa stopped sobbing.

"Why do you love him like that? Like a faithful dog? That's what I could never understand."

The way he had said "like a faithful dog" made her indignant. Every last cell in her body protested, reared up in anger, was filled with hatred towards the man she had been married to for so many long years. She rose quickly to her knees and wanted to say something that would crush him, that would snuff the life out of him, that would choke him, but no such words came to her mind. "Well, I do! I love him! I've loved him all my life!"

Her words had no visible effect upon him.

In the small adjacent room Vera's bed squeaked as she turned restlessly, while Kolya went on breathing loudly and evenly.

"You think you're the only one who can love like a human being," she said in a helpless rage.

"Yes, that's how I love, like a human being," he replied coolly.

She stared at him in amazement, trying to see the expression on his face, but it was too dark, so that all she could see were his eyes glittering as coldly as before. She lay back and began thinking about what he had meant when he said his love was the love of a human being. Was he making fun of her? "I love him, and that's all there is

to it. It's none of your business," she said, not even trying to conceal the hatred in her voice. "You'll never understand anything like that."

"You don't know why you do yourself."

"Maybe I don't want to!" Anfisa sensed there was some truth in what he was saying. "There are things you can't ever put into words. Something you can't explain."

"Oh, shut up!" he gripped her shoulder and shook her. Then he lay back, breathing rapidly for a few moments. When he had finally calmed down he continued, "That's right. Sometimes there are things you can't explain. But you'll have to, sooner or later. If not to anyone else, then at least to yourself."

Anfisa felt he was not addressing his words to her any longer. She was stunned by something she had never heard in his voice before, and her surprise was mounting.

Kirian, meanwhile, was speaking just as vaguely, continuing his own train of thoughts, "There's only one thing I'm sorry about, and that's that I helped Fyodor stick his brother into jail. I should've been arrested, because it was me who sold those horses to the gypsies."

"What? No!" She rose upon her elbow again. "Wait. Does that mean Arkady Mqlchun was telling the truth?"

"Yes. I still don't know how Fyodor talked me into it. He said Ivan killed my father and even though Ivan hadn't told a soul about it in all these years, he'd guessed who'd done it. Besides, he said they'd recently had an argument, and Ivan had confessed. The blood just rushed to my head then. I couldn't care less for my pa!"

Anfisa mused over this, unwilling to believe him. Suddenly she shouted, "You're lying! It's all a bunch of lies!"

"What for?" Then, speaking in the same calm undertone, he continued, "If I drank like a pig before it was because I was so damn stupid. And if I beat you like a dog, well, I'm sorry. Though you might try to understand me, too. There you were, fooling around with Fyodor, and I felt as if my insides were on fire. Sure, it made me wild. So I dragged you off and beat you where the neighbors wouldn't hear. But you won't understand. And you don't have to. It doesn't matter any more. I just want you to forgive me."

"Good Lord! You sound as if you're getting ready to die!" she cried fearfully, being quite unable to understand what it was all about.

"What for? Oh, no. War broke out today, and it's a good thing. I'll be going off soon. There's talk about that it won't last long and that it'll soon be over, but I'm not so sure. Don't you forget that all of Europe's under the German boot now. The Germans are mighty strong. I'll go to my draft board tomorrow. After all, I'm only forty, and that's not that old. They'll take me."

"What are you talking about? Think of what you're saying! If they need you, they'll call you up without asking. But you want to put your head into the fire when there's no need to."

"I'm not done yet!" he said, raising his voice and cutting her short. "I want you to know that if I don't get killed, I won't come back anyway."

"Kirian!"

"Shut up! Listen to what I have to say. The kids are grown. Vera has a job, and before you know it, she'll get married. And Kolya'll be grown-up in another year or two. That leaves you. But I'm not worried about you."

"What are you saying? What are you saying?" She whispered dazedly.

"That's all. Let's go to sleep. It's late." He turned away to the wall.

Anfisa sat up in bed in the darkness for a long while after, trying in vain to comprehend what had happened.

Part Two

A RIP IN TIME BECOMES A HOLE

September was sunny and mild. Luckily, there was no rain. The sun rose beyond Zvenigora. Its rays played upon the dew-heavy leaves of the trees and slowly dispelled the chill of night. The tops of the birches, touched by the morning frost, were thinning out, and dry yellow leaves dangled on the poplars in the wind.

Polikarp Matveyevich was glum and sleepy-eyed as he took the reins from Old Yevsei and plunked his heavy body into the wicker seat.

"Going to the plant? Or the railroad?" Yevsei asked.

"Both. And twenty other places besides."

"Don't leave the whip on the seat! Someone'll be sure to pinch it."

An announcer's tired voice was coming over the loud-speaker in the square: "There has been bitter fighting at the approaches to Kiev during the past several days. The German-fascist command has been bringing up ever new troops, regardless of heavy losses in men and materiel. The enemy was able to break through our fortifications along one section of the Kiev defense line and reach the suburbs of Kiev."

As Kruzhilin drove slowly along the street that was covered with the first yellow leaves of autumn, the announcer's voice became fainter and fainter.

"The Germans are pressing on towards Moscow," he was thinking unhappily. "They encircled Leningrad a few days ago. Minsk and Lvov have long since fallen. And now they've reached Kiev. Vasily was stationed in Peremyshl, near Lvov. We haven't heard from him once since the war began. Where is he? Is he still alive?"

A pain shot through his heart. Polikarp Matveyevich winced and slapped the reins. Brown Falcon broke into a trot, but a minute later he had slowed down to a walk again.

"There was supposed to be a big counter-offensive near Smolensk last month." Kruzhilin's thoughts ran on of their own accord. "There were a lot of encouraging reports in the papers about this being the beginning of the end of the fascist invaders, that the main German forces have already been worn ragged and ground up in defense actions, and that a sweeping Soviet counter-offensive was about to begin. We were all waiting for great, positive changes on the battlefields. Loudspeakers were kept on day and night. True, the Red Army began moving forward in the end of August, engaging the enemy in bitter fighting to the north and south of Smolensk. The city of Yelna was liberated early in September, but soon the Red Army offensive stopped, and no more was heard of it."

The sleek horse pulled the gig effortlessly through the streets of Shantara. Kruzhilin recalled the day, two and a half months before, when the mobilization order for fourteen age groups, for men born from 1905 to 1918 inclusively, was issued and the streets were filled with drunken singing and women wailing. The wailing and singing filled nearly every house until one morning it crept off along the broad High Road to the railroad station where it held sway over everything until noon, when the troop train with the mobilized men on board pulled out.

The ocean of grief kept sending its waves back and forth through Shantara till evening. It seemed to ebb somewhat with the coming of dark, and then the large village succumbed to a fitful, restless sleep as would a sick person.

When morning dawned it was unlike any other. The deserted streets, the silent houses and motionless trees all seemed to have become orphaned. Everything seemed to be emitting a terrible hurt and silent bewilderment. What's the matter? How could this have happened? Kruzhilin felt as if he were personally responsible for the calamity that had befallen the village and its inhabitants.

Unexpected and unlikely responsibilities kept raining down upon him.

About three weeks after the men had left Shantara two troop trains carrying refugees from the front line zones arrived in succession, transforming the village into a gypsy

camp. Tents were pitched at the station, on the main square and on many streets, and campfires burned beside them in the evenings. From morning till night the streets were filled with people carrying bundles and suitcases, and many empty-handed, dressed in clothes that had become filthy and tattered during their many weeks of wandering.

It seemed an impossible task to provide food and shelter for this great mass of hungry, exhausted women, children and old people. The District Party Committee and the District Executive Committee became housing offices for many days that followed. Kruzhilin's office was taken by storm, as it were, several times a day. The refugees demanded any kind of roof over their heads, while groups of local women argued that they could not take in another person. Often his office was filled with weeping and squabbling.

Gradually, a home was found for every person, with some of the refugees sent on to other villages in the district, to other collective and state farms.

The majority accepted their fate and did not protest, as long as they had a place to live and a job to feed them. But there were instances when people refused to go off to the collective farms.

One day a woman in her late thirties burst into his office. She had on an expensive but filthy dress that had been torn at the shoulder and sewn up clumsily with black thread. She had once apparently been plump and blossoming, but had become terribly thin during the journey, so that the skin hung loosely under her chin and on her neck. There was an unhealthy flush on her flabby cheeks.

"I can't go to a collective farm! It's impossible! I'll die there!" she cried and fell into an armchair.

Polipov, who happened to be in the office at the time, poured her a glass of water.

"I love music. Can't you understand? I'm ill. Music is a sickness with me. I can't live without it."

At any other time this might have sounded funny, but Kruzhilin and Polipov gazed at her with pity.

"Please try to be calm," Kruzhilin said, touching her shoulder and causing her to jump as if she had been struck. "What can we do? There's no symphony orchestra here,

either. All the music we get comes over the radio. But there are radios at the farm, too."

The woman was either calmed by this or else she had perhaps finally understood and come to realize the situation she was in, for she said nothing more, but rose and left the room.

On another occasion a wizened little old man knocked timidly and entered the office. "I've come ... pardon me ... you see, they're sending me to a collective farm, and I've just discovered that there isn't even a primary school there." He carried a plaid shopping bag in one hand and a heavy walking stick topped by a silver knob in the other. The expensive walking stick looked completely out of place, for he was dressed in a torn heavy jacket singed on one side and tied with a piece of string, as it was missing all its buttons, a pair of tattered trousers which flapped against his legs, and a sorry semblance of a hat with a drooping brim. He seemed half-blind, because as he spoke he kept looking off into a vacant corner.

"Are you a schoolteacher?" Kruzhilin asked.

"In a way." The old man turned in the direction of the Kruzhilin's voice. He added timidly, as if he was afraid he would not be believed, "That is, I'm a physicist."

Kruzhilin had seen all sorts of people since the war had broken out, but he had not yet come upon a single scientist among the refugees. He felt as if something were gripping his heart so tightly he could not breathe, as ever new vistas of the human tragedy of his people were revealed to him. He sat the old man down in an armchair opposite and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, trying to think of a way out.

"Are you alone? Are any of your family with you?"

"What? Oh, yes. Masha. It happened back there, beyond the Volga. Our train was bombed. I looked for her everywhere, but this is all I found." The old man raised the plaid shopping bag. Then he set it down on the floor and took a crumpled handkerchief from his pocket. He did not weep, but kept blowing his nose again and again, while his chin and sparse tangled beard trembled.

Kruzhilin phoned the regional center and spoke to someone in the recently organized refugee section.

"I know I'm putting you to a lot of trouble," the old

man said apologetically. "Actually, it doesn't really matter. And a collective farm might be very interesting. But what good will I be there? I've spent my whole life teaching students."

A week later a representative of a research institute came for the old man.

Kruzhilin forgot about the reins and dozed off to the even clopping of the horse's hooves. Memories of the old man, of the woman musician, of the troop train made up of red heated freight cars which was to carry the mobilized men off to the front lines and which was surrounded by clusters of women and children appeared and disappeared in his tired brain like smoke drifting off in snatches, to be replaced, time and again, by three long rows of tents of all sizes.

These, however, were not the tents that had once been pitched at the railroad station or near the obelisk on the village square. These had only been put up two weeks before, stretching in three rows along the outskirts of Shantara near the tar-papered local trades sheds. Workers of the farm-machinery factory evacuated to Shantara lived in these tents.

The arrival of the factory had been like a bolt out of the blue.

Towards the end of August Kruzhilin and his staff had somehow managed to settle the main mass of refugees. He heaved a sigh of relief and felt that now, at last, he could begin paying attention to the harvesting. However, late on the night of September 1st the telephone rang in his office.

"You still up?" It was Subbotin. "Hello, then."

"Hello, Ivan Mikhailovich. This is no time for sleeping."

"Are things that bad?"

"It's worse than a nightmare, but, thank God, I think we're over the worst part of it."

"Yes, yes," the Regional Party Secretary replied absently. "I'm afraid the nightmare's only just begun, though."

"What do you mean? We can't take in another person! We've no place to put them up, and no more work for anyone. This isn't a city, after all."

"You won't have any trouble finding jobs for them now. A machine-building plant is being transferred to Shantara."

"A plant? What do you mean? What plant?" Kruzhilin mumbled dazedly.

"A farm-machinery plant."

"Is this supposed to be a joke?"

"I'm afraid not."

Kruzhilin at last understood the enormity of his words, and the hand that held the receiver dropped to the table. "But why should a plant be transferred here? A whole plant?" he finally asked.

"Because the high voltage line passes there. That's why."

"But it's impossible. We won't be able to ... we can't manage it."

"Well then, why don't you phone Moscow? Call Shvernik or Kosygin at the Council for Evacuation. It's their decision," Subbotin said, enunciating each word in a steely voice. Then he added, "I understand you, Polikarp Matveyevich, but what can we do? This is wartime. Two weeks ago the Government adopted a military and economic plan for the last quarter of the year. The plan calls for the plant to start producing machinery on November 1st."

"But that's only two months away! And the plant isn't even here yet!"

"The first trains carrying workers and equipment will arrive in two days. The chief engineer of the plant is arriving tomorrow. You'll have to help him choose a sight for the plant and decide how and where to unload the equipment."

"How and where can we unload the equipment?" Kruzhilin was still resisting, though he understood that his stubbornness, if not outright stupid, was at least unnecessary and useless. There was a necessity, brought about by the war, and this necessity would take nothing into account, so that everything, even impossibility, gave way to it. "What about the factory shops? And the other premises? We don't have anything here. Nothing at all.... And where'll we put the people?"

"That's just what you and the chief engineer have to discuss and decide." Once again Subbotin's voice became steely. "You're to hand in a report to the Regional Party Committee on the construction schedule and the exact date the plant will be put into operation. Your report is due here in exactly one week from now. That's all, Polikarp Matveyevich. That's all, my dear comrade, and let's not discuss it any more," he added, sensing that Kruzhilin was about to object again. "I guess there's no need to remind you that the District Party Committee will be held primarily responsible for the schedule being observed, for the plant being set up in time, for the harvesting, and for everything else. And by the District Party Committee you realize I mean you, Polikarp Matveyevich."

The chief engineer was a small, stout, cheerful man.

"I'm Ivan Ivanovich Khokhlov," he said, entering Kruzhilin's office the following day and tossing his briefcase onto Kruzhilin's desk off-handedly. Meeting Kruzhilin's stare, he became embarrassed, turned red in the face and removed his briefcase. "Pardon me. The people at the Regional Committee told me you've been informed of the situation. The plant isn't very big. There are only a thousand five hundred workers. We produce winnowers, sowers and other equipment needed for the civilian part of mankind. We had to dismantle and pack everything during an air raid, but we managed to load every last machine. Now, then, there's no time to lose. Where can we set up the equipment and where can we settle the workers? "

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? What do you mean? " Khokhlov's round, button-eyes stared at Kruzhilin.

"Just what I said. I don't know. We've just managed to settle two trainloads of refugees. There's not a square meter to spare for your workers. You say a thousand five hundred workers. But that means their families, too. How much does that make all together? "

"About five thousand in all."

Kruzhilin smiled.

"What's so funny? What're you laughing about? Yes, there are about five thousand people. We knew there'd be

difficulties in finding housing for everybody in the beginning. The workers can live in tents until there's something permanent. We've brought along a couple of hundred tents."

"This isn't Africa, in case you're interested. There's hoarfrost on the ground in September, and rain and snow in October. By the end of October the temperature drops below thirty."

Khokhlov stared hard at him. "What? Thirty below? That's impossible." However, he snatched up his briefcase and spoke impatiently, "All right. What we have to do first, though, is choose a site for the plant and see what buildings there are. The people at the Regional Committee told me you have a local trades set-up here, and some of the premises can be used as factory shops."

"All right. Let's go have a look at them," Kruzhilin heaved a sigh.

Half an hour later Khokhlov was examining the low-ceilinged, barracks-type buildings of the local trades establishment, the carpentry and metal-work shops. He bit his full, pink lips and rapped on the wooden walls with a crooked finger. In silence again he examined the warehouse, the one and only brick building, came outside, looked up at the clear September sky and the flying bits of cobweb in the air, at the wooden posts of the high voltage line that circled the village and disappeared beyond the horizon. Then he nodded in the direction of the vegetable storehouse that was covered with turf and said, "What's in there?"

"That's where the district wholesale office keeps its potatoes and sauerkraut."

"Let's have a look."

When they came out of the storehouse Khokhlov said, "Is that all?"

"By no means. See that little outbuilding over there? That's where we make cranberry juice."

"Hm." Khokhlov inspected the dejected-looking territory once again, sat down on an empty crate, took a sheet of paper from his briefcase and began drawing squares on it.

"This is the best place for the powerhouse. This is

where we'll put the main mechanical building and the forge will be here. The carpentry shop will remain as is. By the way, I suppose you know that Savelyev was summoned to Moscow on the way here by a special Government telegram."

"Which Savelyev? "

"Our new director. We've had a new director since August. He arrived together with the order to evacuate the plant."

"What are you getting at? "

"I was wondering whether he might not return with new orders to change the orientation of our plant, so to speak." Khokhlov scratched his chin with the end of his pencil. "There were rumors about that when we were dismantling the plant. Farm machinery doesn't get top priority in wartime."

Kruzhilin merely shrugged in reply.

"Well, we'll see," Khokhlov said rapidly. "Now then, Polikarp Matveyevich. First of all, we'll have to put a fence up around the site. That'll be about forty hectares. I can guess your question, but I'm sure we'll find enough boards here."

"We do have a small lumber mill. But it won't come up with as much as you want."

"I see. Besides, it's not an easy job and will take time. The first trains'll be arriving the day after tomorrow. There's only one way out and that's to string barbed wire instead of putting up a regular fence, although that's probably impossible, too. Where can we get the wire? We'll have to use plain baling wire. Do you think you can find enough? "

"There'll probably be some. How much will you need? "

"A lot. Quite a lot." Khokhlov shook his round head. As he figured how much wire would be needed, his pencil quickly covered the page with figures. Then he raised his head, took in the weatherbeaten buildings and the bare steppe beyond, and suddenly smiled. "Well, my dear Polikarp Matveyevich, you won't recognize this end of the village in another week or so."

* * *

Indeed, the area had changed beyond recognition. A huge rectangle enclosed by a line of high posts with several rows of wire strung between them was dug up and disfigured. Large mounds of earth rose everywhere like huge black waves. All of the old buildings were clustered in one corner, as if they had been washed up by these black waves, and seemed forgotten and forlorn beside the mountains of upturned earth.

Excavators rumbled and roared within the rectangle as they dug the foundation pits. Piles of brick and stacks of boards, logs, iron beams and rolls of wire were everywhere, as were men with spades, picks and crowbars. An endless stream of trucks and clattering tractors pulling heavily-laden carts delivered the bricks, lumber, cement, sheet iron and machinery that kept arriving at the station day and night. At first, everything except the machinery was unloaded within the enclosure. Soon, however, it became crowded, and the entire area without was used to stack the building materials.

The machinery and other mechanisms were unloaded in a special area where planks had been laid right on the ground for them.

"You poor things," Khokhlov said and sighed when the first trucks delivered the first machines. He patted the grimy, cold metal side of a lathe and said, "They've had a hard time, too. What they need is a roof over them."

"They're metal, they won't catch cold," an unshaven man said in a dull, tired voice.

"I want each machine covered with canvas! Every last one! You hear me, Fedotov? I'll hold you personally responsible."

"Where'll I get all that canvas? You give me the canvas, and I'll cover every inch of ground as well."

"Quit the backtalk. They're to be put under canvas, and I don't care where you get it."

Kruzhilin recalled the episode as he now approached the building site and thought warmly of Khokhlov and the man he had called Fedotov, a man he had never seen again.

As he drove up he noted that the machines had been



placed in even rows and that each had been carefully bundled in canvas. He thought of Fedotov again and said to himself, "Good for him! "

Polikarp Matveyevich got out of the gig, threw the horse a tuft of hay and loosened the belly-band.

"Hey, there! " someone called.

He saw a man in a quilted jacket. There was a holster on his broad belt. "You can't stop here. Can't you see? This is factory property. Move."

When it had been decided to unload the machines and mechanisms outside the factory enclosure they had thought of fencing it in, too, but had then decided that it would be cheaper to post a guard.

"My name's Kruzhilin. I'm the District Party Secretary. Where's Khokhlov? "

"Ah. Who the hell knows? He's everywhere at once." Then, seeing that Kruzhilin was walking off, he caught up with him and said. "Pardon me, but there's something I want to ask you. How are we going to spend the winter here? " And he nodded in the direction of the three long rows of tents. "The nights are cold now. And the children are starting to cough."

Kruzhilin stopped. "We'll manage. We'll start building you houses tomorrow."

"What? How much do you think we'll put up when winter's just around the corner? "

"We'll manage."

The housing problem was a nightmare. From the very start they had managed to somehow find living space for about five hundred factory workers with the largest families by moving refugees who had arrived earlier to various outlying collective farms. However, that still left a thousand families, over three thousand people in all. The latter had been living in tents from the day of their arrival.

Naturally, they could still have moved many more refugees to the collective and state farms, but Khokhlov had protested vigorously.

"We can't do that! We'll never be able to get the plant going by November if all we have is our own workers." He brandished some sheets of paper covered with columns of figures. "Why, we've got to move thousands of cubic

meters of earth, to begin with. You've got to find homes for men! I can't believe that in a settlement as large as this you can't find space for three thousand more. I'm going to check myself."

That night he joined several representatives of the District Executive Committee in a check of all the available living space. He was solemn when he entered Kruzhilin's office the following morning.

"You're right," he muttered in reply to Kruzhilin's unspoken question. "Every house is crowded. People are sleeping on the floors, packed in together. An old woman shoved us out with a poker. You know what she said? She said, 'Why don't you cart me off to the cemetery? Don't wait till I die. Then you'll have my bed.' But we still have to find space for the workers! "

"As soon as we have the plant going, we'll start putting up barracks. That's the fastest way. But now there's no lumber, no time and no people to do the job."

They had to face it: there was no place to move the workers and their families from the tents.

Kruzhilin passed them now. Some of the campfires over which the women had cooked breakfast that morning were still smoking. Children ran about, shouting and laughing, and Kruzhilin guessed they were playing hide-and-seek. There were more than enough places to hide here.

He spotted Khokhlov near the future powerhouse. The pit had been completed the previous day and the foundation had been laid during the night. The walls now rose half a meter above the ground.

Khokhlov, unshaven and muddy, but as high-spirited as ever, was bawling out a man dressed in cement-spattered overalls. "What did you promise me at midnight? Huh? How high did you say the walls would be by morning? And look at them! What's the matter? Didn't you have enough bricks? Or cement? "

"Sure, we did."

"Sure, you did! I made it my duty to see that you did! Well? What's the matter? "

"The men are dog-tired. They're falling asleep on their feet."

"Don't give me any of that! " His tone suddenly

changed and became plaintive. "Don't let me down, Petrovich. Please. We've got to get the powerhouse up by next week. Hear me? The director's arriving today. What'll I tell him? How'll we look him in the eye?"

"We understand. We all understand. I guess we'll manage," Petrovich replied hoarsely.

"Please do. Try your best. We can't not do it. Understand? We just can't. Oh, Polikarp Matveyevich! Good morning. Have a good night's sleep? I can see you've been up working all night." Khokhlov's eyes were red-rimmed and inflamed.

"How'd you sleep?"

"Like a bear. Let's go over behind that stack of bricks where we can hear ourselves, think and have a smoke."

They sat down behind the bricks. From where they were they had a good view of the entire site. The sun's feeble rays had slipped over the mounds of earth and were reflected in the glass panes of the revolving excavator cabs. They glittered like streaks of lightning on the spades of the diggers.

The diggers were mostly women. Young, middle-aged and old, they were all swinging their spades, clearing space for the future factory buildings, some of which now appeared as brick rectangles rising a meter or more above the ground.

The women pushed wheelbarrows, carried bricks, sand, cement and lime on stretchers. They mixed the cement in wooden crates, shovelled the lead-heavy, oosing mass into tubs which they carried to where the masons worked. No matter where they looked, they saw women, no one but women doing the hardest, dirtiest work.

"How much will the women still have to do if the war drags on for another year?" Such were Kruzhilin's unhappy thoughts. "What if it drags on for two? There's no one else except them now. We've only been at war for over two months, and three-quarters of the men in the district, if not more, have been called up. Only a few agronomists and tractor drivers have been deferred, and I have a feeling it won't be for long. That means all the farm work will fall... it's already fallen upon the shoulders of our women."

"Isn't this something! " Khokhlov was addressing him. "Things are really coming along. Our plant will soon be smoking away! Remember your fears and doubts? "

"Yes," Kruzhilin replied unhappily. "If the plant hadn't been put under the People's Commissariat of Ammunition I don't know how we'd have managed. Remember? There wasn't even any wire to fence in the place. No cement, no bricks, hardly any lumber. And all you brought along were your machines and a couple of excavators."

He heard someone snoring loudly and turned. Khokhlov was sound asleep. He was leaning against the bricks with his head tilted back making his bristly Adam's apple protrude sharply.

* * *

Polikarp Matveyevich was finishing his cigarette and thinking back over the jumbled events of the past days.

Subbotin had begun by saying that Kruzhilin's nightmare was only just beginning, and he had been right, for by comparison the problem of settling the first refugees now seemed like child's play. The District Party Committee had ordered all the collective farms and enterprises in the district to come up with all building materials on hand, even down to the last brick and nail, and to deliver everything to the factory site. However, the result barely made up one-thousandth part of what was needed. Meanwhile, there were daily phone calls from the Regional Party Committee to find out how things were coming along and when the schedule for putting the plant into operation would be presented.

"Which schedule? How can we give you a schedule? " Polikarp Matveyevich shouted into the receiver one day, feeling that he was at the end of his tether. Then, unmindful of the consequences, he said, "We can't, we won't have the plant operating by November. Yes, we're digging the foundation pits. We've mobilized every able-bodied person. What are we supposed to use for cement? Give us the materials and then ask for results. What? Sand and gravel?

Yes, we're getting them from the river. But what about cement and bricks? They're not lying around on the bank, you know. What? You can't even give us a kilo of cement? Then why... Who sent us the plant then? The Council for Evacuation? You mean I should call them? Well, I did. They said call the People's Commissariat. We phoned them, and they referred us to you. Now you're referring us back to the Council for Evacuation."

Actually, such a schedule was already in existence. It had been drawn up by Khokhlov, but one look at it, at the amount of work to be done and the terms for completion made Kruzhilin gasp.

"You can't be serious, Ivan Ivanovich."

"Everything's according to the time-table we've been given."

"Did all your engineers and Party organizers of the shops take part in drawing it up? "

"No. But Savchuk, the Secretary of the plant's Party bureau, knows."

"Let's get them all together for a meeting today."

Kruzhilin's office was crowded that evening. His eyes went from face to face. The men were all strangers to him. They all looked solemn. The only familiar ones were Khokhlov and Savchuk, a big man with a short nose and jutting chin whom he had met at the station when the first train had arrived.

"I'm Kruzhilin, Secretary of the District Party Committee. This is Pyotr Petrovich Polipov, Chairman of the District Executive Committee. These are the District Committee bureau members. We'll soon get to know each other better, but now let's get down to business. The Regional Committee is waiting for our report. We have to present a schedule for rebuilding the plant and putting it into operation. Such a schedule has been drawn up, and you've all seen it. It's no problem to put it in an envelope and send it off. I'd like to hear your opinions. Shall we send it off? Can we have the plant in operation by November 1st? "

No one said a word.

Then Savchuk rose. He spoke in a tight, strained voice. "I don't understand why you're asking us to comment. The schedule's not up for discussion. It's been drawn up in

accordance with the deadline given to us. Now what do we need? An unlimited supply of building materials, plus twenty thousand workers working two shifts every day. And how much do we actually have? Seven thousand in a shift and no building materials. So, Comrade Kruzhilin, why don't you tell us when we're going to get the building supplies and more workers? Then there's something else. What about housing? It's nearly winter. The tents are freezing. People are beginning to get sick. We're also short of food. We'll soon be into the second half of September. School started on the 1st, but our children are not attending yet. Will they be going to school this year? "

What could Kruzhilin say? Nothing. The schedule for rebuilding the plant had been disrupted from the very start. The district hospital was crowded. The schools could not take in half of the children now living in Shantara. Such were the facts, but what could he do? He had been trying his best to organize, supply and settle things. Every district organization and service had been mobilized to meet the demands of the plant under construction. Polipov had been the only one whom he had relieved from seeing to it that the refugees were settled and working, and, later, from all worries concerned with the plant.

"Your one responsibility now is the harvest," he had said to him. "Keep me informed, and I'll join you as soon as I can."

Everything had been thrown into raising up the plant, but nothing was coming of it, which meant he was unfit for the job and incapable of organizing and directing the work. This bitter thought returned to him again and again. A better man would have shown much better results. Savchuk had just given him a dressing-down. He had been right. There had been no sense in calling this stupid meeting. He shouldn't have done it. But what should he have done instead?

Kruzhilin could not recall closing the meeting. He sat at his desk, pressing his hands to his throbbing temples. Everyone except Polipov had left. Polipov stood by the window, looking out at the swaying branches of the maples.

"What's the use of racking your brains over it, Polikarp

Matveyevich? The schedule's been drawn up. All you've got to do is send it off."

"What?" Kruzhilin raised his pounding head. "You know it's a bluff."

"Don't you think they know it?"

"What do we do then? After the first of November?"

"Then?" Polipov smiled. "Anything might happen by then. At any rate, it'll be easier to explain things afterwards than it is now."

"What?"

"Sure." Polipov shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's always easier to explain past difficulties, to present the whole picture, so to speak, in all its objectivity. Nobody'll understand you now when you say you can't put the plant into operation by November 1st. But later they'll see, they'll understand it was impossible to meet the deadline. Besides..."

"What?"

"Besides, there won't be time to dig into the past. There'll be new tasks by then, and they'll be still more difficult. What this calls for is some psychological analysis, as they say."

"Hm. Psychology, you say? You're nobody's fool, are you?" He rose and walked heavily out of the office, turning to say, "But don't forget that we have to have the plant operating by November."

"When you spoke to the Regional Committee on the phone this morning didn't you get all excited when you tried to prove we'll never meet the deadline?"

"That has nothing to do with anything."

"But we really can't ... it's impossible..."

"I know. But we must."

"How?"

"I don't know."

He still did not know several days later and so, in order not to pick up the receiver when the Regional Committee phoned, he was spending his days and nights at the construction site. He encountered Polipov two or three times in the interim. The latter said nothing, did not question him, but merely regarded him with knitted brows. "He's actually gloating," Kruzhilin would say to himself each

time they met, and a feeling of distaste towards Polipov began to well up inside of him.

One night, feeling completely exhausted and spent, he phoned Subbotin's apartment in Novosibirsk.

"Hello, Ivan Mikhailovich," he said and stopped, not knowing what else to say. The Regional Party Secretary waited patiently at the other end of the line. "Forgive me for phoning so late. You know, I'm not even phoning on business. I just decided to call you."

"Don't lie to me, Polikarp."

"You're right. But this isn't an official call to the Regional Secretary. Do you mind? You see, there's no one else I can talk to like this. Man-to-man."

"So you're all in? "

"I wouldn't put it that way. You can be all in after you've accomplished something. After you've gone some of the way. But I'm just treading water. Working away at it with all my might and not budging an inch. What'll I do? "

"Mm. This isn't something to discuss over the phone. If I tell you that all of us here are in the same boat ... treading water, will you believe me? We're doing our best, but there's hardly anything to show for it. Nearly three dozen enterprises have been transferred to the region to date. Some are like your plant, some are bigger, some are smaller. And another dozen are expected any day now. Who can tell how many more there'll be after that dozen? Have you been listening to the news? "

"What are we to do? "

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Kruzhilin realized how naïve and out of place his question was. What were they to do? As if he didn't know. The Germans were advancing rapidly. There seemed to be no stopping them. The Red Army was surrendering one city after another, and everything possible was being evacuated to the East. To the East. Where else? "I mean, I know what's going on. But when will there be an end to it? "

"It'll come. We'll stop the Germans. And after we do, we'll drive them out."

They were both silent.

"But what am I to do about the plant? What can I do? "

"I wish someone would tell me," Subbotin replied wearily.

"I see. I guess Polipov's advice is right, then."

"What does he say? "

"He advises me to send a fictitious schedule to the Regional Committee."

"Well.... Polipov's not that dumb after all."

"Yes. I see he's smarter than I am."

"Don't ask for compliments." Subbotin sounded annoyed. "I didn't say smarter. I said not that dumb."

"Do I send it out then? "

"What else can you do? " He hesitated and then added, as if explaining why Kruzhilin was to hand in at least a fictitious schedule. "Because there's been talk here about you getting all flustered and running around in circles."

"It's the honest truth." The receiver had become warm from his hand, and he now felt as if it were burning his ear. "I am."

"Well, who isn't, given the present situation? " Subbotin had spoken so curtly it made Kruzhilin jump.

"What're you saying? Just think what you're saying! "

"Maybe I'm not saying the right thing at all," Subbotin said and his voice softened. "I won't say this tomorrow, but you were the one who wanted to talk man-to-man. To continue. Man-to-man, I'll say: the responsibility that's come crashing down on us is staggering. You, me, all of us, have to tackle things which, if we call a spade a spade, are practically or completely impossible to do under the circumstances, and given the deadline we've been given." Suddenly, his voice became very gentle as he bared his heart to say, "But, my dear Polikarp Matveyevich, if you and I convince ourselves we're helpless, distraught and incapable of getting the upper hand, where will that lead to? Try thinking about this."

"Yes. Yes. Yes," Kruzhilin repeated three times over.

"Hold the fort, Polikarp Matveyevich. As soon as we stop the nazis things'll be easier on all of us. As for your plant, I think everything'll fall into place very soon."

"What do you mean? "

"Savelyev, the director, phoned from Moscow to say the plant'll probably be under the jurisdiction of a military

department from now on. That means you'll get top priority for building materials and manpower."

"Wait a minute. But it's a farm-machinery plant."

"That's all, Polikarp," Subbotin said, cutting him short. "This isn't a telephone conversation. We've been talking too much as it is. By the way, do you know that Savelyev, the director, comes from Shantara?"

"What?"

"Just what I said. He was born someplace near there."

"Wait a minute. Which Savelyev could it be? There's Fyodor, he's a tractor driver. He has a younger brother, Ivan, who lives here, too, now. And there's an elder brother. What's his name? Andrei or... Listen, his name's Anton, isn't it? Anton Silantievich?"

"Yes. He's a very fine person. We were in the underground movement together in Novonikolayevsk before the revolution."

"What do you know?" Kruzhilin then surprised himself by adding, "Polipov was there with you, too, wasn't he?"

"Yes. It was a hard time for all of us. Why did you mention him?"

"I was wondering whether by any chance he might be the one who's been informing the Regional Committee about me being all flustered and running around in circles."

"What makes you..." Subbotin cleared his throat, "and just what is it that makes you think it was him?"

"He's got a grudge against me for taking his place."

"Don't jump to conclusions," Subbotin replied and quickly said goodbye. However, the pauses in his speech and the way he had spoken indicated clearly enough that he was not refuting this.

Kruzhilin tossed and turned most of the night, worrying about the plant, thinking about Polipov and recalling in detail and analyzing his talk with Subbotin. As dawn was breaking, the telephone suddenly pealed sharply.

"Hello. This is Savelyev speaking. Is this the District Party Secretary?"

"At last! Yes, I'm the Secretary. Where are you? We've been expecting you. I don't know what to do about

your plant here. Where are you phoning from? ”

“Moscow.”

“Moscow,” Kruzhilin repeated, listening to the sound of the word. “How are things in Moscow? ”

“Fine. Except for the blackout. There’s not a light on anywhere.”

“Have they bombed the city? ”

“You probably know all about the dogfights outside Moscow from the papers. Sometimes a nazi plane breaks through and reaches the city. I’m sorry to have wakened you, Polikarp Matveyevich. It’s midnight here, and we’re still up. There’s just been a Government decision on our plant.”

“We’ve been expecting it. I spoke to the Regional Committee a few hours ago.”

“Well then, you know. How are things coming along? ”

“Very badly. All the machinery and equipment have been brought in from the railroad station and delivered to the building site. It’s being cleared and they’re digging foundation pits. Every able-bodied person has been mobilized. But they’re mostly women, and even school-children. Everyone who could be spared was transferred here, but the manpower shortage is still acute. Every man of military age has been called up.”

“Yes. That’s obvious.”

“But we don’t have the materials to build the factory shops. The people are still living in tents. We’ve no place to put them.”

“I see. There’ll be more people coming.”

“What? But that’s impossible! ”

Savelyev seemed not to have heard the exclamation and continued, “We’ve been given some of the personnel and equipment of a defense plant. It’s all on the way to Shantara now. The question of building materials has been settled. You’ll be getting bricks, cement and other items in three or four days from now. Your problem will be to unload the freight cars as fast as you can. Where’s Khokhlov? And Savchuk? Tell them to take some of the people off the site, as many people as there are, and assign them to unloading the cars. This also includes delivering the materials to the site. There’ll be a couple of dozen trucks

on the trains, too. But you'll have to mobilize everything you have on wheels, everything down to the last wagon."

"I see."

"I'll have to be here for a few more days. Then I'm going to Novosibirsk to arrange for all the shipments."

"What about the people? How many more are coming here?"

"About a thousand five-hundred more. They'll have to be put up in tents until November, and then we'll think of something." There was a pause. "How's my brother Fyodor? You know, I'm from Shantara."

"Yes, I know. Fyodor's all right. He's harvesting the grain in Mikhailovka now."

"Yes, I know he's a combine driver. Has there been any word of my brother Ivan? Do you know him?"

"Yes, of course. He's in Mikhailovka."

"He is? He's back?"

"Yes. He got back on June 22nd, the day war broke out."

"I see. Well then, I'll be seeing them soon. I haven't seen them for thirty years. I'm looking forward to it. Well, I guess that's all, Polikarp Matveyevich. Goodbye for now."

Kruzhilin looked at his watch. The hour hand had just passed four. It was still dark outside. All the sky was black, except for one spot beyond the village where spotlights blazed all through the night at the building site. There the sky was a pale gray. It was pale gray each and every night, from twilight to dawn. Actually, it was not extinguished, but became brighter each morning, dispelling the darkness of night and making the sky ever brighter, until at last the sun came up.

Kruzhilin did not go back to bed. He was thinking about the means of transportation as he paced up and down. Yes, they would manage that. It would mean borrowing a certain number of trucks and even tractors that were now being used for the harvesting. The grain would be brought out from the fields by horse and wagon. There were a lot of horses and a lot of carts and wagons in the district. He'd call an emergency meeting of all the directors of the district organizations, collective farm chairmen and

representatives of the plant to discuss the problem and draw up a plan of action.

They were far from their goal, and it was still a wonder how they would ever achieve it, but now, at least, they had been given outside help. Everything else would depend on the people and how the work was organized. This was another matter entirely. This was something that the District Party Committee and he, personally, could and should be responsible for.

He went to the sink, splashed some cold water on his face, went back to his study, took out a clean sheet of paper and wrote out the text of an urgent telephone message, to be related to the chairmen of all the district collective farms and the directors of all the district organizations.

* * *

Kruzhilin sighed as he recalled this.

Although the sun's rays were no longer hot, they still afforded some warmth. It was pleasantly warm beneath the brick walls, and soon beads of perspiration appeared on Khokhlov's brow as he slept.

The air was filled with clanging, churning, shouting and cursing. People who hurried by in both directions looked at Kruzhilin and Khokhlov irritably, as if to say: what were two strong, grown men doing, loafing in a quiet corner?

Khokhlov's head was tilted to reveal a neck grown thin and covered with dark bristles. The sight of it aroused a feeling of pity and compassion in Polikarp Matveyevich.

It was high time Kruzhilin left, but he could not bring himself to waken Khokhlov. He pulled out another cigarette and struck a match. Neither the roaring of the tractors and excavators nor the constant shouting had wakened Khokhlov, for these were sounds he had become accustomed to. However, the hiss of the match as it burst into flame made him start. He opened his eyes. Their first frightened expression quickly vanished, and he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Have a good nap?"

"It's...." Khokhlov smiled apologetically. "I keep dreaming of hissing incendiary bombs. They sound just like matches, except that they're a lot louder." He wiped his brow with an unsteady hand. "And a child screaming."

"What?"

"Yes, my daughter died. She was burned to death during a raid. She was seven. I never told you."

Indeed, he had never mentioned his family, and Kruzhilin had had the impression that he was single.

"She would've been in school now," Khokhlov continued, staring at the tips of his dirty boots. "But she died. It was terrible. It happened at night. There was an air raid, and we all ran out of the house. She tripped and fell. That's when the incendiaries started falling. One landed right beside her. It began spinning on the pavement. Her dress caught fire. She managed to jump up and screamed. And then she collapsed and rolled ... right towards the bomb, into the melted asphalt. It all happened in a flash, in a second. I barely managed to hold my wife back, to keep her from running into the bomb."

Khokhlov was silent. He stood there, staring at the tips of his boots unseeingly. His eyes were dead and dull.

"I understand," Kruzhilin said softly.

"Oh, no," Khokhlov shook his head. "That's impossible. No one can understand such a thing if he hasn't been through it."

"Is you wife ... is your family here now?"

"Yes. Of course. Over there," he nodded in the direction of the tent. "My wife and my elder daughter. Our only child now. I didn't think my wife would pull through. But she's better now. Except that she never speaks. Not at all. But I think it'll pass in time. After all, life does go on. She's begun to work, and that's all for the better. She's an economist, but her job here is mixing cement for the power house."

Kruzhilin thought back to his first encounter with Khokhlov. He had strode into his office, tossed his briefcase on his desk and got right down to business, and his voice had been cheerful and firm. Yet, at that very moment, his distraught wife had been on the train, coming

here under the care of their other child, probably. How strong he had to be. What great and vital inner resorces he possessed.

They sat there in silence for a few more moments.

"Well, then, Ivan Ivanovich. What I actually wanted to talk to you about is the tents. It'll get very cold in November. We had a bureau meeting last night and decided...."

"Yes, I know. You mean the dugouts. Savchuk told me. Why didn't you ask me to attend the meeting? "

"We did."

"Yes, come to think of it, you did." Khokhlov rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Damn it. My head's like a balloon. Last night I even remembered I wanted to go, but they were getting ready to put the transformers into position, and I had to be there to see it was done right. Yes, dugouts."

"It's the only solution. That's what Savelyev says, too. We'll start building houses as soon as we can during the winter."

"Is he still in Novosibirsk? There are a few things I have to discuss with him. After all, I'm a farm-machine engineer. Now I don't even know what we're going to be producing."

"Artillery shells. I thought that was clear."

"Artillery shells? But I've never made a shell in my life. And I don't know how to. We've got to plan the layout differently then, and set up the machinery. I don't know what goes where now. And neither does anyone else. We don't have a single man here from the defense plant yet."

"I think someone's arriving with Savelyev today."

"At last! As for the dugouts," Khokhlov produced a dog-eared notebook. "I think you spoke of that huge hollow at the bureau meeting. I had a look at it this morning and jotted down a few things. What was it intended for originally? "

"I don't know. When I was a boy the old folks used to say it used to be a big pond that was fed by the Gromotushka. There used to be a system of wooden pipes, but they rotted and the pond eventually dried up."

"I'm glad it did. The sides are rather steep, but that's not bad at all. We can move the earth from the edges with excavators. Here, have a look."

He opened the notebook to a sketch of small squares around the edge, of the hollow which looked like a string of beads.

"A dozen shovelfulls will do the trick. That'll give us a dugout. All we'll need then will be something for a roof. I think we'll find enough lumber for that. The entrances are from the bottom, over here. It's not too convenient, but that can't be helped. Does the pit ever fill up with melting snow water?"

"No. There's usually just a small puddle on the bottom till the earth thaws."

"Fine. It'll even be nice: the estates will face on a lake." He turned the page. "Here are the figures. We'll need five excavators working for a month. Naturally, we'll also need a work force, but that shouldn't be too hard, not if we put five hundred people a day on the project. The main job is to cover the dugouts and see that the doors are well insulated. I think the standard plan should be as follows." Khokhlov turned another page and Kruzhilin saw a pencil sketch of a dugout.

"Here's the entrance from the bottom of the pit. There's a door and a small window on each side. The first room is a combination kitchen, dining room and family room. Then there's a partition and a bedroom. The bedroom has no window and will be lit by an electric bulb, but it'll be warm. The people will have a warm room to sleep in. There'll be a stove here, to heat both rooms. What do you say?"

As Khokhlov spoke of a kitchen, a dining room and a bedroom he sounded as serious and convincing as if he were elaborating on the floor plans of a regular house.

"I was thinking about two- or three-family dugouts," he continued. "We'll have to see what the fastest way is. I've sketched a couple of dugouts."

"When did you have time to do all this?" Kruzhilin's voice was sad.

"It wasn't hard. It didn't take long." Khokhlov closed his notebook with the snap. "There's something much

worse. The mobile shop was hijacked yesterday."

"Yes, I know. The militia phoned me yesterday. There's a search on for it."

The workers of the tent colony, who had top priority for all available goods in Shantara, bought their food, clothing and shoes from a number of mobile shops set up in trucks. A few days before a large shipment of clothes and boots had arrived in Shantara and was dispatched to the tent colony in two mobile shops.

The trucks had arrived towards evening and the shops had been open for business for about an hour and a half. With the coming of dark they were locked up for the night and, as always, the night watchman was stationed nearby. From the start the tent colony had its own patrol and the night watchman had agreed, for a small extra remuneration, to keep an eye on the mobile shops. This made it unnecessary to drive them back to the village for the night.

On the morning in question both the watchman and one of the mobile shops were gone. Yelizarov, the local militiaman who had decided to see if all was well in the tent colony, discovered the loss at dawn.

The watchman was found behind one of the tents. He had been felled by a heavy blow to the head. When the old man was brought around he ran his hand over the bloody wound and wailed, "To hell with this job and the money! I'm resigning as of right now. Oh, my poor head! "

"Who hijacked the shop? Did you see them? " Yelizarov persisted.

"I don't know. All I can say is be on the lookout for a boy of about ten or twelve."

"What boy? Can you describe him? "

"How the hell should I know? It was pitch dark. How do you expect me to know what he looked like? He said he'd heard a noise inside the truck, so I put my ear to the side. That's when they cracked me on the skull."

"I'm sure the truck will be found. It's not a pin to get lost in a haystack. Well, I guess we've settled the problem of the dugouts," Kruzhilin said and took out his pocket watch. "Oho! I have to hurry to the station. Are you going to meet Savelyev's train? "

"I should, but I have to see to the transformers. Savchuk is there to meet the train."

* * *

The station was about three kilometers from Shantara. It had been built at such a distance because of the rising spring flood waters of the Gromotukha that inundated the left bank very deeply some years. The railroad builders had wanted to be on the safe side.

Kruzhilin held his impatient horse in check. The heavy traffic on the road over the past three months had broken up the asphalt. Polipov had ordered Malygin to fill in the pot-holes and ruts with sand and gravel, so that the road had been restored. However, Malygin had recently been called up for active duty, and since neither Kruzhilin nor Polipov had time to think about the road, it was all broken up again. "We'll have to repair it before the rains set in, otherwise it'll be impassible. Well, this'll be something else Savelyev can worry about."

The endless stream of vehicles moving towards him was made up of trucks and tractors pulling heavy trailers loaded with factory equipment.

One of the tractors suddenly stopped as it drew abreast of him. The driver, a young man, jumped out of the cab and waved his hand as he ran up. Polikarp Matveyevich reined in his horse.

"What's the matter? "

"I just wanted to meet you. You're Kruzhilin, the Party Secretary, aren't you? " The boy's gray eyes were cold and steady, and seemed mistrustful. A tangled shock of hair protruded from under his cap.

"Yes, I am. And who are you? "

"My name's Semyon Savelyev."

"Oh, so you're Fyodor Savelyev's son. You've grown up, haven't you? " Kruzhilin sized him up with interest.

"Yes. I even intend to get married."

"Did you want to invite me to the wedding? "

"No. I've been deferred. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Kruzhilin's eyes became hard. "I see. And you want to see active service."

"Why am I worse than everybody else? I was deferred when I came of age, because there weren't enough drivers at the machine and tractor station. That was in peacetime, and I didn't mind. But now...." Semyon pulled off his cap, pushed his hair back and clamped his cap back on.

"I'd like to be sent to the front lines, too, Semyon, but they won't take me, either."

"That's not the same at all. You've got your hands full here."

"Don't you? "

"My job isn't that important. Sure, I understand, we've got to take in the harvest and put up the plant. I've been moving equipment for the past two weeks. But any girl can be taught to drive a tractor. It's not that hard."

"Don't forget it'll take time to teach her, and the plant can't wait."

"I see. So you won't help me? "

"If they need you, they'll call you up without any help from me."

"You mean I'm not needed now? "

"What I mean is we need you more here right now."

Semyon stood there for a moment, staring past Kruzhilin at the vast steppe that was turning dull and dreary, spat on the ground and strode back to his tractor. He hopped into the cab and jammed his foot on the gas so hard the motor roared and the tractor shuddered. Kruzhilin could feel the vibration of the earth under him and smiled to himself.

The railroad tracks were crowded with dusty freight trains. The station was surrounded by tractors, trucks and pairs of oxen and horses harnessed to carts and wagons. The loaded trucks and wagons moved slowly onto the road and into the oncoming stream of empty vehicles. The noise was deafening.

Although every inch of track seemed to be taken up by freight trains, another one managed to squeeze in among them. A soot-blackened locomotive was pulling in about three dozen flatcars loaded with machinery, lumber, bricks and crates. There was only one covered freight car in the

train. A man in a raincoat jumped down lightly at the platform. He had his leather cap in his hand.

Kruzhilin recognized him immediately. He had Fyodor's high forehead and heavy brows, although he had no moustache and his hair was iron-gray, not black.

"Hello, Anton Silantievich."

"Kruzhilin?"

"Yes."

Anton Savelyev did not immediately proffer his hand, but stared hard at Kruzhilin for a few moments. And then, he did not immediately let go of his hand.

"Well, here we are at last. These are our engineers."

About fifteen men were getting off the train. These were all middle-aged men. Polikarp Matveyevich shook hands with each in turn as they were introduced. As he acknowledged their greetings he was feverishly thinking of where he could put up these men and of whether they had come with their families or not.

"We'll have a look around first," Savelyev said, taking in the station. "How's the unloading coming along?"

"We're doing all we can."

Savchuk popped up from under the train. He was the plant's Party organizer and had spent the past ten days at the station, directing the unloading operations. He had on an oil-stained quilted jacket and looked like a trackman or tractor driver. "At last!" he exclaimed, shaking hands all around. "What do you want me to report on first?"

"Let's not waste time. I suggest we spend the next ten minutes inspecting the station and trains. This'll give us a pretty good idea of how things are coming along. Come on, comrades." Savelyev turned to Kruzhilin and added, "I'd like to have a talk with you this evening. I can see you're on your way somewhere now." He nodded at the whip in Kruzhilin's hand.

"Yes. We're harvesting, and I want to see what the situation in the fields is."

"I see."

"The District Committee can put you up for the night, and then we'll have to find something. Have you come with your family?"

"They're on the way. Well, till this evening then."

As Polikarp Matveyevich dozed in the gig, lulled by the clapping of the horse's hooves, his thoughts turned to Savelyev. He seemed to have a keen eye, for he had noticed that Kruzhilin was off to the fields. And he had liked the general tone of their conversation. It had been simple and to the point.

The carriage raised a trail of white dust. It did not rise high, but did not settle, either. It floated, suspended above the road until it gradually faded away like a morning mist.

There were rye fields on either side of the road, and the heavy, overripe ears drooped. Rye that had not been harvested by September! This had never happened before. But here it was now, acre upon acre, with the grain falling from the ears. God forbid if a wind blew up and shook them empty.

Two sated hawks circled lazily over the steppe. They seemed to be searching out the fattest quail. The sun was as hot as on a summer's day, streaming down generously, hard at work.

* * *

Polikarp Matveyevich reached the threshing shed of the Red Grain Collective Farm towards the end of the day. Long shadows cast by the stacks licked the ground. There were a dozen stacks of wheat in the vicinity of the threshing floor.

Gigs drove back and forth. The farmers were threshing wheat in the middle of the yard, shouting above the clatter of winnowers at the tired horses that circled round and round. Over a dozen harnessed wagons stood off to a side. The gigs were loaded with sacks of grain.

Pankrat Nazarov, the farm chairman, was seated at a long table beneath an overhang. His bony frame was hunched over a bowl. At the far end of the table a round-faced woman was painting letters carefully on a length of red cotton cloth.

"Ah," Nazarov said coldly by way of greeting. "Let's have another bowl of noodles, Glafira. Sit down and have supper."

The woman dropped the paint brush into a glass of white paint, brought over an earthenware bowl of noodles, a worn wooden spoon and a large chunk of bread. Then she picked up her brush again.

"She's a combination cook, agitator and slogan painter," Pankrat said.

Polikarp Matveyevich had not eaten all day and was hungry. As he ate his supper he kept thinking that Pankrat Nazarov had aged a lot in the time he had been working in Oirotia. It was not a matter of his having gotten thin. He seemed to have dried up and shrivelled, like a pine plank that had been lying out in the sun.

Pankrat ate the last of his noodles and wiped the bowl with a bit of bread. "There, it doesn't even need washing now. Hey, Petrovan! "

A bearded little old man with reflective, light-blue eyes came up and said hello. Kruzhilin remembered him. His shovel beard had long since become gray, but his eyes were as young and clear as ever.

"That's all for today," Pankrat said. "Harness the cart horses, too. We'll finish up the rest with flails." He turned to Kruzhilin and added, "We're sending a wagon train to the granary."

Kruzhilin had guessed as much.

"How can you, when it'll soon be dark? The horses are all in! " Glafira muttered.

"Shush, woman! You're the spitting image of your mother! Remember Vasilisa Poskonova?" he said to Kruzhilin. "She's our village gossip, and her tongue's as sharp as a razor."

"What's my mother got to do with it? "

"You're just like her. Daughters are always like their mothers. Hey, Volodya! "

"Here I am." A boy in a patched shirt came up. He was barefoot and was carrying a pitchfork.

"Lean your pitchfork against that stack and go home, or you'll sleep through your lessons tomorrow. Harness the horses, Petrovan. What're you waiting for? You can let the horses graze in the dell on the way back. And don't load more than fifteen poods on a gig. And put all the horses on to stacking wheat tomorrow morning." Nazarov was still

seated, although he had turned his back to the table.

Glaflra finished writing and picked up the cloth. She spread it out so that the men could see it. The wet, uneven lettering read: "Bread for the front."

"How does it look? "

"It'll do. No one'll see it at night, anyway. Tack it up on the lead wagon," Pankrat said without looking up.

"This is rather late in the year to be delivering grain, isn't it? " Kruzhilin said.

There was a long pause as Nazarov sat there, watching the horses being harnessed and gigs being loaded. "Haste makes waste," he said at last. He was in a bad mood and was annoyed by Kruzhilin's visit.

When Kruzhilin had checked the reports on grain deliveries he had been surprised each time to see a blank space beside the name of the Red Wheat Farm. Polipov had on several occasions reminded him that Nazarov was not meeting his State grain deliveries. "He's holding back on purpose. And I needn't remind you that this isn't peacetime," Polipov had said ominously the last time. Since Kruzhilin had no chance to drive out to the farm, he kept telephoning Nazarov who listened attentively to all he had to say and promised each time to start deliveries, but did not.

The laden gigs rolled away from the mounds of winnowed grain, making room for empty ones. Women were swiftly filling sacks with grain, using scoops and pails. Finally, the last gig was loaded. Petrovan Golovlyov came up to the chairman again, but Nazarov simply waved him off, saying, "Good luck."

The old man did not reply. He went back to the wagon train, which started up a moment later.

"Don't you think they could have taken more? " Kruzhilin asked a few minutes later.

"The horses are tired. And they still have to stack the wheat tomorrow."

"You mean you won't have another wagon train ready for delivery tomorrow? "

"Sure, we will. We'll send off another one tomorrow evening."

"That plus today's delivery will make about a hundred

centners. And this is the second half of September. I'd say you could do better than that."

"We're doing as much as we can."

"I can see you have something up your sleeve, Pankrat."

Nazarov, who had been sitting still all this time, suddenly jumped up and sliced the air with his hand. "Listen! I'm going to start cursing now, and it's not going to sound pretty. There are people all over the place. Let's get out of here. Where are you going? To Shantara? "

"That's the general direction."

"Let's go. It's on my way. We can have it out on the way. Out in the steppe where nobody can hear us."

However, he did not start cursing when they reached the steppe, for he had cooled off by then and when he spoke, his voice was calm. "If I've something up my sleeve it's only because I'm following your instructions."

"What do you mean? "

"There's no hitch to it. Didn't the District Committee pass down a decision saying the harvest should be taken in without losses? It did. On the very first day of the war. And what do you think I'm doing? Didn't you see the unthreshed stacks all around the shed? That's where all our rye is. Where do you think it is on the other farms? Half the harvest is still out in the fields. And what if the weather takes a turn for the worse? Aha! So you do see it. But we won't have any losses. And now the wheat's beginning to ripen. We're mowing and stacking it as fast as we can. We've only got two harvesters. That's next to nothing. Most of our best men were called up. The District Committee borrowed half of our horses for the plant. And who can guarantee that the army won't take the rest? Hm? "

"Nobody."

"There. So what am I supposed to do? If we lose the harvest, I don't think you'll pat my head. What'll you probably do is crack my skull. So here we are, doing our best. Look."

Some distance away about three dozen women wearing bright blouses and kerchiefs were cutting the wheat with sickles and twisting it into sheaves. The setting sun had

turned the field to gold, and the tight sheaves lay on the ground like gold ingots.

"So you see, we're doing whatever we can. First, they cut the wheat, then they bind it into sheaves and put it up in shocks till we have a chance to stack it. Then we can start threshing it. We'll meet all our deliveries. You know that."

"Yes, but...."

"What's wrong then? "

Kruzhilin did not reply.

They rode on in silence. Brown Falcon was tired after the long day and did not pull at the braces. Pankrat looked back at the women in the field and said,

"For as long as I've known Agata Savelyeva, I've nothing but praise for her."

"Is she there, too? "

"Yes. She got all the old women together and brought them out to the field. See how much they've done in a day. They're a real help. Well, at least Ivan's been lucky in something. She's a ringing woman."

"A what? "

"People are like churchbells. One bell seems to be cast well and shines like gold in the sun, and is really something to look at. But when you strike it the sound is cracked. It's like hitting a chunk of pig-iron. But then there's the kind that you wouldn't look at twice, because the brass is all dark and green. But if you touch it, it'll sing out like the sun coming up in the sky. That's a real, ringing bell."

Nazarov stared off at the large yellow disc of the sun going down beyond the jagged cliffs of Zvenigora. The edge had collided with the granite and melted, trickling down the top of the mountain in bloody red streams.

The evening mist was rising from the black gorges of Zvenigora. It seemed that this was not mist at all, but that the fiery streams of sun rushed down into the damp gorges and then shot up again as bolts of boiling steam.

"How's Ivan? "

"All right. He's our shepherd. I wanted to assign him to the mill, but he said he wanted to be out in the steppe by himself for a while, to breathe the smell of the grasses and listen to the birch trees rustling. Old dog that I am, I

didn't think of it myself."

"How's Fyodor doing? "

"Fyodor? He puts his all into the job. I don't think he gets more than a couple of hours' sleep a day."

"Yes, I know. Polipov praised him."

Nazarov smiled wryly, got his horny hand around his unshaven chin, but said nothing.

"Have Ivan and Fyodor met? "

"I don't think so. I haven't heard anything about it. Anyway, I don't think they're too anxious to."

"Their brother Anton got here today."

"He did? " Nazarov opened his faded eyes wide. "What d'you know? I don't remember him at all. All I remember was a blond kid running around in the Savelyevs' yard. I think his father sent him off to live with his uncle in Novonikolayevsk about ten years before the revolution. And then they said he was in and out of tsarist prisons. One day, that was back in 1910, some gendarmes came to Mikhailovka from Novonikolayevsk. They were looking for Anton. They said he'd escaped from prison. Where's he come from now? Why's he here? "

"He's been appointed the director of the plant that's come here."

"What d'you know? "

No matter that the sun had been so bright that day, the air turned suddenly chill before sunset. The chill of evening rolled in waves.

Brown Falcon pulled the wicker carriage up a hill, and from the top of it they could see the sharp shadows cast by the stony cliffs of Zvenigora. The shadows spread quickly across the mown fields, across the standing rows of grain, engulfing the fields as the sharp black prongs became ever longer. The shadowy space seem smaller and the impression was that these were not shadows cast by the crags creeping along the ground, but the mighty Zvenigora that had picked itself up and was striding towards them irrepressibly.

"Pull up here for a minute. This is where I get off." Nazarov climbed down, waited to see if the Party Secretary had anything else to say, but Kruzhilin was smoking in silence. "Go on, start cursing us. Like Polipov did when he

was here this morning. He came down on us like a hurricane. Actually, though, we haven't delivered any grain to the granary yet."

"No, I won't. But still, you'll have to speed up your deliveries a bit."

"Hm. Which means they're putting pressure on you from the Regional Committee."

"They're interested in the situation," Kruzhilin replied vaguely.

Nazarov rubbed his iron hand against the wicker edge of the carriage as if his palm itched. "All right, we'll speed things up, but we'll have to pay dearly for it. But maybe God'll take pity on us. I want you to know I'm only doing this for your sake, Polikarp. And only as a temporary measure. If you want to know, we'll deliver more than we usually do. We've had a bumper crop." The old chairman took in the fields awkwardly with a sweep of his arm and sighed, "Ah, if only all of this was rye! "

This was a long-standing problem in the region. For as far back as anyone could remember, the rye crops were three or four times that of wheat planted on the same land here. Prior to the revolution, the local kulaks had raised nothing but rye. Thus, Mikhail Kaftanov had harvested more rye from his three hundred desyatins than he knew what to do with. Some years there were such bumper crops that dozens of Kaftanov's stacks remained unthreshed in the fields into the second and even third year. Since he always had an unlimited amount of grain stored away, he never increased his tillage, for what he had was more than he needed.

After the revolution and during the early years of the collective farms rye was practically the only cereal raised here, but then the higher-standing organizations began to have a say in the planting scheme. Before he had been transferred to Oirotia Kruzhilin had been pressured to cut the rye in favor of other crops. Now, after his return to Shantara, he was aghast: there were hardly a thousand and a half hectares under rye in the whole district.

The sharp spears of shadow were climbing the rise where Kruzhilin and Nazarov stood. Pankrat kept rubbing his hand against the edge of the carriage.

"Well, Polikarp, are we going to increase the rye crop next year?" he asked in an undertone. "You said we would last spring."

"It's still a long way off till next year. We'll see."

At first, Nazarov's shaggy, dusty brows twitched. Then his parched lips grimaced. "We keep looking, but we don't see much. We keep walking in single file and are afraid to miss our step," he said bitterly, "and we aren't given a chance to catch our breath. Do you know how much money we're losing by planting wheat?" Pankrat Nazarov spat out each word as if he were tossing heavy logs onto the ground. He shifted his weight heavily and awkwardly where he stood on the dusty road.

"What're you mad at me for? I'm not to blame and you know it!"

"Well, who is then? You think it's just Polipov? And Yakov Aleinikov? It's you, too. Didn't you just say next year's still a long way off and we'll see then? My, aren't you a timid soul!"

"I don't have much say in the matter."

"Well, I have even less. But, just to give you an example, I took Ivan Savelyev on as a member of our collective farm then. Aleinikov tried to get at me in any way he could, but I wouldn't budge. Maybe by doing that I helped Ivan get his bearings again, and get back his self-respect. But you're not helping me."

These last words were like a whiplash, because Kruzhilin felt they were unjust, they were an affront. "What? In the first place, I've been here less than a year." Kruzhilin was excited and felt he was not saying what he wanted to say. "Then again, do you have any idea how fast they'll be down on our necks if we plant rye in fields that are now under wheat?"

"Maybe they will! But if there were two or three more like us it'd be harder to keep us down. And if there are others someplace else, and still others.... In a word, like Count Lev Tolstoy said."

"Who?"

"Count Lev Tolstoy. Don't look at me like that. I haven't had much schooling, and I did never could see my way through any of his big books. But sometimes I read a

bit out of one. There's something very wise in it. He says that if the bad people all band together, the good should band together, too, and that would give them strength and hope. There's a lot more in the same vein. And since there's more good people than bad.... Don't look at me like that."

"Who would you put in with the good, Pankrat Grigorievich? "

"Well, I'd say you weren't too bad."

"I thank you kindly. What about the people in the land offices here and in the region who make us plant wheat instead of rye? "

"What do you think of them? "

"Me? I don't think they're enemies of Soviet power. They also wish it well."

Nazarov looked down at the ground and cleared his throat. "I don't know. I don't know. Ivan Savelyev tried to convince me that everything Yakov Aleinikov does is for the good of the country, but sometimes he makes mistakes. Now you're saying the same thing. Maybe you're both right. But how can you explain the fact that there are more of mistakes being made than hairs in a beard? "

"I know it's no good, Pankrat, but what can we do? You don't know how much time I've spent thinking about all this, about these mistakes and injustices, trying to figure out how and why they came to be? "

"And where did all your thinking get you? "

"I'll tell you. I don't know whether I'm right or wrong. We haven't been in power that long. You might say we still have callouses from our rifle straps on our shoulders, though we've had to take up our rifles again. We're groping our way towards a new life. We've tried this way and that to see which is better, but sometimes you can't see the result after just a year or two. There are all kinds of people at the head of a government, no matter which government. There are wise men, and not so wise, and there are the just plain stupid ones. But you can't tell right off that they're stupid. Who knows how much evil they'll do before it's discovered? But they don't do it consciously, but because they think they're doing good. Should they be shot for their mistakes? Even though they're real enemies of the

people, enemies of our cause.”

“We know that. They’re still around. Take Makar Kaftanov, for instance. They say he’s just been released from jail.”

“He’s just a common thief. A mobile shop was hijacked from the factory yard. It looks like his doing. They’ve started an investigation.”

“Ivan Savelyev says he’s no thief. I mean he is a thief, but not the ordinary kind. He’s avenging his father. He’s getting even for the riches they lost.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you are right. See how mixed-up everything is? Or you take us. You said I wasn’t too bad. To tell you the truth, I don’t consider myself too bad, either. But not too good, either. I’m doing my job in the district, and I think I’m doing a good job, and that what I’m doing is right. But maybe in a year or two we’ll see that it’s not all as good or right as I think.” Kruzhilin spoke slowly, as if thinking aloud.

Nazarov frowned as he listened, and it was difficult to say whether he agreed with Kruzhilin or not.

“So that’s how things stand as far as mistakes are concerned. That’s the conclusion I’ve come to. In time, there’ll be less and less mistakes made, because we’ll learn to manage things the right way.”

“A lot of those mistakes could be prevented right now. Like the case for sowing rye instead of wheat. You don’t have to be smart to see the difference.”

“You think so? In a good year there’s a very good wheat crop here.”

“That’s right. Once in five or six years.”

“But the memory remains for a long time, and that’s why people say it’s better to sow wheat, because white bread is tastier than brown bread. So, you see, we’re told to sow wheat from good intentions again. Now you go ahead and tell me who the good men are and who are the bad.”

Nazarov said nothing.

“You see, it’s not all that easy to follow Count Lev Tolstoy’s advice as you understood it. To put it more clearly, you can’t follow it the way you or I would want to. Life can follow it. And time.”

The sharp spears of shadow crept higher and higher up the rise. The sun was practically gone beyond Zvenigora, with only an edge no bigger than a slice of watermelon still showing above the stony ridge.

"You'd better be going," said Nazarov. "We can sift it over this way and that, and prove anything you want to. That's what words are for. But I want you to know, Polikarp, that I've already sown half the wheat fields to rye."

"What?"

"Just what I said. Either you try to get at me like Yakov Aleinikov did then and leave me alone in the end, or remove me from my job. It's all the same as far as I'm concerned. I'll tell you one thing, though. Our farm'll have a good crop next year. What if the war drags on? And I have a feeling it will. That means hard times ahead. Rye flour won't give you white buns, but it'll give you a good loaf."

"When did you manage it?"

"Just in the nick of time. Before you borrowed our horses for the plant."

"I see. Does Polipov know about it?"

"If he knows too much he won't be able to sleep at night. I want him to take care of his health. I've told you this as our Party representative."

"And what am I expected to do now?"

"That's up to you. The way I see it, nothing. That'll be the best way out. Say, I didn't tell you anything, and you don't know anything about it."

"Meaning, you want me to lie?"

Nazarov shrugged his shoulders beneath his loose-fitting, dusty old jacket and walked away without replying. Then he slowed down, turned and walked back slowly to say, "There's something I've been wanting to ask you all this time. Have you heard anything from Vasily?"

"No. I don't know where he is."

"I see. He and my Maxim were right in the very middle of hell there in Peremyshl. That was hard luck."

"The last letter I had from Vasily was written before the war. He wrote it last spring."

"I know. I can take it. But it's my wife. She never says anything in the daytime, but at night I can hear her crying."

Gritting her teeth and crying. She looks through the papers every day. She looks for his name in the awards lists, and then at night I can hear her crying again."

Pankrat turned and walked away without saying goodbye. He trudged off slowly, a hunched figure on the road.

* * *

Anton Savelyev, Fyodor Fyodorovich Nechayev, the new chief engineer, and the other engineers arrived in a truck from the station. They rode in the open back of the truck in silence, jostling each other during the bumpy ride, and not until they drew up by the gate of the building site did Savelyev say,

"We'll bog down on the road here when the rains set in."

Nechayev was a tall, thin man with small features and a goatee, and the first impression he made on one was unfavorable. Although he had been recommended highly to Savelyev, Anton had been disappointed upon meeting him in Moscow and immediately felt alerted against the taciturn engineer. However, appearances are often misleading, and a week later this feeling of mistrust was gone completely. Nechayev had managed in his cool, calm way to obtain through the People's Commissariat of Ammunition a staggering amount of raw materials and building materials. Nechayev was a former Cheka man who had once worked under Dzerzhinsky and who possessed the same clear mind and iron will as did his former legendary chief.

Now Nechayev was taking in the future plant site slowly. There was nothing to be seen except huge mounds of earth and brick walls beginning to rise here and there. He spoke in an icy voice,

"My job is to put the plant into operation as quickly as possible. It's your job to provide everything necessary, including a good road."

"A grader and a truck will be assigned to the road. We'll keep filling in the potholes. The problem is to keep the road in good condition till the frost sets in. Next spring

we'll pave it. There's nobody to do the job now."

Little rosy-cheeked Ivan Ivanovich Khokhlov came scurrying up and shook everyone's hand at length. Then he walked off to a side unobtrusively and seemed to become smaller and rounder still. He pulled out a handkerchief, turned away and wiped his damp and dusty neck. Savelyev was the first to understand his agitation and touched his shoulder, saying,

"The day will come when we'll be producing combine harvesters and sowers again."

"Yes, of course. We'll need so much farm machinery after the war's over."

For the next half-hour they inspected the site, advancing between the mounds of loose earth, the stacks of bricks, logs and lumber. The diggers, bricklayers and truck drivers gazed after the unusual-looking group. Some of the new arrivals had on top coats, some had on quilted jackets, and two or three wore expensive, creased and mud-spattered raincoats.

"I've laid out the shops," Ivan Ivanovich said, rolling ahead of them like a heavy, soot-covered melon. "Naturally, I guided myself by the former plant. This was going to be the jobbing shop, this was the forge shop, and this was the foundry. But I don't know now. This is your game now, as they say," he concluded, addressing Nechayev.

Nechayev did not utter a word during the entire tour of inspection. His thin lips were compressed, the blueish whites of his eyes gleamed sullenly from under the visor of his shaggy cap and every now and then he would rub his chin. Savelyev said nothing, and neither did the others.

"This is going to be the power house," Khokhlov resumed, leading them over to a brick box. "This has top priority. We've decided to set up the equipment first and then complete the building around it."

For the first time Nechayev looked at him warmly.

The plant office, a huge, unpartitioned wooden barn, was deserted, save for an old man with a long scarf wound around his neck who was pouring over some papers. The floor around his desk and the nearby work-benches were piled high with sheaves of bound and unbound papers. Several more desks were moved against the wall and were

also piled high with papers.

"This is our bookkeeping department and Party committee, and plant committee, and ... all the offices combined," Khokhlov said. "Everybody is out to lunch now."

"Clear enough," Savelyev said, taking a seat at one of the empty desks. "Sit down, comrades."

They found seats wherever they could, some on chairs, some on stacks of paper.

"And so, here we are now, and we've inspected everything personally," Savelyev continued. "Most of the machinery has arrived. We have enough raw materials to begin with, and shipments are continuing. Our task is amazingly clear-cut: we must ship the first thousand shells to the front in two weeks from now."

Khokhlov's head came up sharply. He lurched forward as if he had been shoved, rose quickly and flailed his arms. All eyes were on him, but he said nothing.

"Yes? What is it, Ivan Ivanovich?" Savelyev inquired.

"Uh, pardon me. What did you say? When are we supposed to ship out the first thousand?"

"In two weeks from now. May we hear your opinion, Fyodor Fyodorovich?"

Nechayev rose and removed his cap. He had thinning blond hair. Skin as pink as a child's showed through it. "First of all, I'd like to note the good work of the local authorities, although none of them are present here. The unloading is coming along very well. In general, I expected things to be much worse. Anton Silantievich, I'd like you to inform the Regional Party Committee and the People's Commissariat of Ammunition of this in a separate report. To continue, I'd like to commend Ivan Ivanovich Khokhlov and his colleagues for having chosen a very good site and for everything that they've accomplished in just a few days' time."

Ivan Ivanovich had not expected this praise. He lurched forward again, but did not rise. Instead, he looked around in dismay.

"I'd like you to report to the Party bodies and the People's Commissariat on this, too," Nechayev continued. "I see our common task as follows. I will spend the time until this evening checking on the necessary and available

work force of engineers, technicians and workers together with the executives and chief engineer of the former plant, but our figures will be based on the needs of our plant. Tomorrow morning the shop foremen, department heads, et cetera, meaning all the production chiefs, must receive their appointments. Tomorrow morning we begin assembling and testing the equipment in the shops."

"Wait a minute!" Khokhlov jumped to his feet. "If we do that, we'll be assembling the machinery out in the open."

"Yes, out in the open. However, we'll have to expand some of the future plant buildings. It would have been perfect if you'd thought of making them bigger from the start, Ivan Ivanovich, but you had no way of knowing that the orientation of the plant was going to be changed. Which means you're in no way to blame. I assume the power house'll be put into operation in a few days."

"Yes, of course." Khokhlov sounded dazed.

"You've done a great job by starting with the power house. It'll save the day for us, because if we have electricity, we'll be able to ship the first shells in two weeks from now."

Nechayev looked from one to the other of his colleagues sternly and tilted his head, as if trying to remember what else he wanted to say. Suddenly, he smiled shyly and smoothed his thin hair. "That'll be all until tomorrow, comrades. You can use this time to get settled. The people at the District Executive Committee will tell you where you're going to be put up."

Anton had known this stern man for nearly a month, but this was the first time he had seen him smile so disarmingly, shyly and with such childish naiveté. It brought a smile to his lips, too, which was probably the first he had smiled in the past three difficult months.

* * *

During these three months Anton Savelyev had felt nothing but disgust towards himself. It had been born in an instant in the forest clearing near Peremyshl at the sight

of the black eye of the sub-machine gun staring at him, when something cold had risen up in his chest and stomach to seep through his body, while the blood pounded in his ears and his hands went up into the air of their own accord. "What am I doing? What am I doing? You dog, what are you doing? Choose death, not this disgrace!" His thoughts beat against his head, while his hands, so heavy and numb they seemed to be someone else's, kept rising higher and higher over his head. Then he sensed rather than saw that the Germans had surrounded him, that someone was frisking him, turning out his pockets, and then something sharp, apparently the gun barrel, jabbed him between his shoulder blades.

"Komm, komm ... schnell, schnell!" an alien voice commanded, and they were led down an abandoned road through the forest.

As Anton stumbled along he kept saying to himself: "They caught us like sitting ducks ... like sitting ducks...." Except for this phrase, his mind was a blank.

Vasily Kruzhilin walked on ahead, bent double under the weight of the captain's body. Behind them were the Germans, four or five of them. They were speaking in loud voices and laughing, feeling very pleased with themselves. Suddenly, he heard the sound of a harmonica. He looked back. It was the fat-faced one who had picked up his rifle and Kruzhilin's sub-machine gun, both of which were now slung over his shoulder, while his own sub-machine gun hung from his neck. The others had their guns trained on the prisoners.

"Komm, komm!" the German directly behind them barked and raised his gun the moment Savelyev turned to look back.

Anton could see he'd open fire in another moment. "I've got to escape. No matter what. Now! As soon as I get to that tree. I'll cut into the woods," he was thinking feverishly. At that very moment Kruzhilin stumbled and fell flat across the road. The captain's lifeless body kept him down. Kruzhilin was gasping for breath.

"Steht auf! Steht auf!" the Germans shouted, rushing towards them and kicking the two prone bodies with their cleated boots. Then one of the nazis took a step

backward and raised his gun.

"Leave them alone! Don't touch them, you pig!" Savelyev shouted. He bent down quickly and raised the captain's body from Kruzhilin, shouldering it. "Get up, or they'll shoot you."

Kruzhilin got up. His breath came in gasps, and sweat ran down his face in dirty trickles.

The Germans seemed to be looking on with interest, but they did not lower their sights.

Once again they continued on their way as the fat-faced German played his harmonica. Savelyev did not know how long they were on the road, but it seemed like forever.

At last the outskirts of a large village came into sight. The houses were ablaze, and the village was engulfed in clouds of black smoke. This was all Savelyev noticed through the acrid sweat that was pouring into his eyes. His parched mouth gasped for air, but there was none.

Bent as he was under the staggering weight of the limp body, he suddenly felt a gun butt prodding him through a barbed-wire gate. He could not regain his balance after the shove and began to fall, but someone supported him and steadied him, someone removed the unbearable weight from his back.

"Let's have him. Stretch him out here," unfamiliar voices were saying, and Anton could not understand whether they meant Captain Nazarov or him. He was led somewhere, and someone steadied his elbow. He fell with a sense of relief into something soft, apparently grass, and closed his eyes.

He lay there and listened to truck motors roaring nearby, to two alien, guttural voices and to the short spurts of machine-gun fire. There was nothing terrible about the sound of the firing. It was as if someone were ripping dry old sheets of paper close to his ear.

When he opened his eyes he saw three fleecy clouds overhead, beside them, rising up from the ground and trailing off high into the sky was a crooked column of black smoke. It seemed to be intentionally by-passing the little white clouds in order not to sully their purity.

Savelyev sat up and saw several hundred Red Army

men. Their uniforms were tattered and scorched. They sat and lay about on the ground in silence. The silence was oppressive. The men seemed afraid to look each other in the eye or even to move.

Savelyev looked around. Everywhere his vision was blocked by barbed wire strung in several rows from tree trunk to tree trunk and encompassing the clearing. In places where the trees grew sparsely, posts had recently been put up, for the soil around them was fresh and had not been properly tamped down. German sentries paced up and down outside the enclosure, their sub-machine guns cocked.

"So, I see," Savelyev whispered soundlessly and then saw Nazarov's body stretched out on the ground beside him.

He touched him. The captain's body was soft and warm. Nazarov stirred under his hand. His parched, swollen lips moved, and Savelyev guessed rather than heard the words: "Water ... drink."

"Does anyone have any water? Comrades! Does anyone have any water?" Savelyev repeated.

A soldier whose head was swathed in bloody rags replied, "No. They took away whatever we had."

Nazarov seemed to have heard the reply, to have understood it, for he relaxed. He did not moan though from time to time he ran his tongue over his dry lips.

"What about Kruzhilin? Where's Vasily?" Savelyev wondered, and as he did he saw Kruzhilin sitting beside him, hugging his knees and resting his head on them. Savelyev touched him. Vasily turned his haggard face slowly. The skin on his cheekbones was so taut it seemed it would burst. There was a dull, dead glitter in his sunken eyes.

"What happened? How did it happen?" Vasily mumbled through barely-parted lips. "We should've ... back there, on the hill near the river ... got crushed by the caterpillars...." He broke off, shuddered, fell face down on the ground and began to sob.

Savelyev touched his shoulder, then stroked it, and Kruzhilin's sobs subsided. He lay there thus until evening.

New prisoners were prodded in singly and in groups from time to time. Twice German bombers droned over-

head. Towards evening a column of trucks passed through the razed village. That was all. Nothing else occurred that day. All the while the nazi sentries paced slowly up and down outside the barbed wire enclosure.

Wounded and beaten Red Army men moaned and thrashed about in delirium here and there. At sundown a soldier rose up, crawled towards the barbed wire, leaned on it for support and shouted.

"Beasts! Lousy fascists! Give us some water! Water! "

One of the sentries went over, leaned across the wire and slashed him with his entrenching spade, splitting his skull. The soldier remained hanging limply suspended from the wire. Then the German wiped his spade meticulously on the soldier's shirt.

With the coming of darkness Vasily Kruzhilin sat up and shook the dirt off his shirt. The dull, dead glitter in his eyes was gone. Instead, they were full to over-flowing with anguish and grief. "Oh, no," he said softly. "You can do whatever you want. As for me, the minute it gets dark ... I'll chew through the wire if I have to and escape." Savelyev said nothing.

With the coming of darkness a long line of trucks appeared. They fanned out and converged on the camp, their blazing headlights practically touching the wire. It became as light as day inside the enclosure. A German climbed onto one of the trucks and shouted to them in broken Russian: "I warning! Everybody laying down! Who sit, walk, come any close to fence will killed. We shoot on all. No warning. Laying down, every Russian swine! " He fired three shots point-blank at those who had been sitting closest to his truck.

A murmur run through the camp and was immediately met with spurts of machine-gun fire. The men fell, pressing close to the ground.

"Well, son," Savelyev said sadly as he lay, face down on the ground, "don't even try to crawl towards the wire. You'll only get killed and so will a lot of others."

It was a warm, still night, and the stillness was broken by the moaning of the wounded men. The headlights burned on through the night, sending their bright beams

into the enclosure. Now and then a sentry's figure would loom up above a headlight.

The night passed without a single shot being fired. Savelyev even dozed off. He came to with a start from a rustling noise, put his hand out to where Kruzhilin was, and his heart missed a beat. Kruzhilin was gone.

"Vasily! " he whispered anxiously. At that very instant there was a burst of machine-gun fire, ripping the stillness of the night asunder. A wave of human bodies rose up at the opposite side of the enclosure and rolled across it with a roar. In a moment the entire camp was on its feet. Savelyev was drawn up after them. Shouting and shooting blended into a terrible, frightening uproar, as the men rushed back and forth, were felled by the bullets and trampled by the living.

"Get down! Down! They'll kill us all! " Savelyev yelled, although he could not hear the sound of his own voice. He shielded Nazarov from the maddened crowd, then grabbed hold of someone and forced him down, repeating this with a second and then a third man. This seemed to bring the men to their senses, and everyone dropped quickly to the grass. The shooting ceased. Now the air was filled with the loud moaning of the wounded.

Once again the headlights shone on indifferently. They were switched off at sunrise, and the trucks rumbled off.

The village beside which the temporary POW camp had been set up had been burned down to the ground the night before. The rising sun which, as always, was bright and fresh after the long night, lit up the heaps of smouldering coals and the sooty brick chimneys.

Day had broken, but the men behind the barbed wire, stunned by what had happened at dawn, still lay motionlessly on the damp ground. Then they began to stir. One rose up, then another, and here and there they began to speak in low voices. Vasily Kruzhilin appeared. He said nothing, but lay down on his back and stared up at the blue sky of morning. It seemed that he did not hear Captain Nazarov moaning beside him, nor see the sky he was staring at unblinkingly. His face was ashen and drawn, his cheekbones sharper still.

"You're not wounded, are you? " Savelyev asked

"No. I'm alive," Vasily replied after a while. "But what's happened to Olya? Where is she now?" His sunken eyes became moist as tears welled up in them. He did not wipe them away, did not even blink.

"Maxim! Can you hear me?" Savelyev called, bending over Nazarov.

"No, he can't. He's better off, because he can't hear anything. But I'll run away anyway," Kruzhilin said, still staring up at the sky.

"Shut up! It'll take planning to escape. Look how many people were killed on account of you."

Vasily rolled over on his stomach, and his shoulders began to heave as they had the day before, while he beat his head against the soft ground. Then, as he had done the day before, Savelyev once again put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

Anton had not eaten for nearly two days, but he was not hungry. He was thirsty. The soldier who had asked for water the previous evening was still draped over the barbed wire.

Another hour passed, or perhaps two, or three. Savelyev had lost all track of time. A long black limousine with curved front fenders and resembling a beetle drove up from the direction of the razed village. It was followed by a truckload of nazi soldiers. The sentries dashed back and forth. A tall, thin German officer got out of the car. His belt was so tightly buckled it seemed to be cutting his body in two, so that he looked like an ant standing up on its hind legs.

The soldiers jumped out from the back of the truck, ran into the enclosure and began prodding the prone men. The prisoners did not understand what was wanted of them and shied away from the Germans, stumbling over the dead and the wounded.

The officer also entered the enclosure. He shouted, bringing his soldiers to attention instantly.

"Gentlemen! I do not like confusion. You are to line up in four rows. Quickly!" The officer said, speaking perfect Russian.

The prisoners began forming a semi-circle along the fence. Kruzhilin and Savelyev each got a grip under one of

Nazarov's arms and raised him up.

"Leave the dead on the ground," the officer said.

"He's not dead, he's wounded," Savelyev replied.

"Oh! And who are you? Why are you in civilian clothes? "

"Because I'm a civilian."

"Oh," the officer drawled again. He was not more than thirty and freckle-faced. There was nothing menacing in his expression. His pink lips turned up in a smile. "All right. We'll look into the matter. Get back in line."

While the prisoners were lining up, the soldiers dragged out those Red Army men who had died during the night or had been killed at dawn and tossed their bodies into the truck like so many sticks of firewood.

The prisoners, supporting the wounded, stood in a semi-circle, four rows deep, waiting to learn their fate. The German soldiers had lined up opposite with wide spaces between each, ready to mow the prisoners down at a moment's notice. "Is this the end?" Savelyev wondered sadly. "How stupidly a person's life ends sometimes. And how cheaply."

However, they were not to be mown down. The officer had been smoking leisurely while the dead had been loaded into the truck. Then he flicked away his butt and said,

"Jews and Gypsies, one step forward."

The Red Army men stood silently, as before. The silence dragged on for a minute, and another. The officer removed his cap, examined the hatband and wiped it with his handkerchief. Then two Red Army soldiers came forward reluctantly.

"What's the matter? Aren't there any more Gypsies or Jews?" He began a measured, careful inspection of the lines of prisoners, poking his finger now at one man, now at another and a third. Two husky German soldiers followed the officer and yanked the men he had indicated out of line, herding them towards the first two.

Then the officer returned to where he had stood and waved his hand. Several soldiers prodded the men who had been singled out towards the gate and the truck. Without warning they opened fire on them from behind.

The rows of prisoners stirred.

"Take it easy, gentlemen," the officer said, raising his hand. "That is all. We are not going to shoot anyone else. Communists and Red Army officers, one step forward."

Once again they stood there motionlessly. The truck loaded with corpses snorted and drove off.

When Savelyev and Kruzhilin had been taken prisoner and their pockets turned out, Anton had seen one of the Germans holding his passport. He had not seen his Party card, though. "Where could it be?" he had wondered, remembering that he had put both his passport and his Party card into his inside breast pocket after the regimental commissar had checked them and returned them to him. That had been near Peremyshl. But the Germans had only taken his passport. His Party card was gone.

He had discovered its whereabouts that night in the camp. The seam of his pocket had burst, either during the last battle or as he had carried Nazarov before they had been captured, and his Party card had dropped into the jacket lining. "What luck!" he had thought with relief.

During the night he had removed it from its cardboard cover, thought a while, then taken off his muddy boot, turned down the top, tore the acrid, sweaty lining with his teeth and stuck his Party card inside. Then he scratched up a handful of dirt, spat on it and rubbed the mud over the tear in the leather to cover up the fresh rip.

He knew it was not much of a hiding place, but he could think of no better one.

"Well, then, aren't there any Communists or officers here?" the wasp-waisted nazi officer demanded. "I'm not blind, you know. I can still tell an officer when I see one." Then pulling out his pistol, he screamed in a high-pitched falsetto, "One step forward, swine!"

About ten men came forward.

"And what about this wounded one?" the German said, walking over to Savelyev and Kruzhilin. "He's a Red captain, if I'm not mistaken." He grabbed hold of Nazarov, yanking him away from them. The captain collapsed at his feet. The German looked at him closely, nudged his head with the tip of his boot and raised his pistol.

"Wait!" Kruzhilin shouted. He lurched towards the captain, squatted down, practically crawled under him,

hoisted the senseless man onto his shoulder and took his place beside the other Red Army officers.

The officer watched them and his pale, short, bristly eyelashes went up and down. He snickered and stuck his pistol back into his holster. "Ah, Sehr gut! Very commendable! "

The German soldiers formed a circle around the Red Army officers and began hustling them out the gate. The prisoners watched with bated breath, expecting them to be shot down the moment the last man was out of the enclosure.

However, the Germans tightened the circle and led the officers off towards the burned village.

"As I said, gentlemen, no one else will be shot," the officer said. "They are being taken to a deportation camp for Soviet officers. You'll be taken to another camp today. There you will be fed and will be given water ... that is, if you name all the Communists among you. I imagine there are quite a few, but, unfortunately, we have no time to go into this now. Aufwiedersehen. Goodbye, gentlemen."

His little head swayed back and forth in its high peaked cap as he walked out the gate, got into his car and was driven off.

The lines of prisoners swayed and broke. The men ran across the enclosure towards the side closest to the ruined village. It seemed that they would tear down the barbed wire and knock over the posts. But bursts of machine-gun fire shattered the air again, and the earth, ripped up by bullets, spurted at Savelyev's feet as he ran ahead of the others. The men stopped. They looked after the Red Army officers who were being led farther and farther away.

"They'll shoot them anyway. They'll take them out of sight and mow them down! Ah! " Someone choked out the words and sank to the ground helplessly.

Savelyev stood there, watching the officers for as long as they were visible, his eyes on Kruzhilin, who was carrying the captain. Before disappearing behind the charred ruins of a building, Vasily looked back at the camp. Savelyev saw the German guard closest to him raise the butt of his gun in Kruzhilin's direction and perhaps even hit him: Kruzhilin seemed to crouch or stumble, but did

not fall. He walked on quickly and then disappeared from view.

* * *

"That's all I can tell you. That's the last I saw of Vasily," Savelyev said, ending his difficult tale as he sat gripping his cold glass of tea opposite the Secretary of the District Committee. "I know what this news means to you. But I had to tell you, because ... because it's best to have it out at once."

Kruzhilin's wife Anastasia was the third person at the table. She sat there as tall and stiff as if turned to stone. She had not uttered a sound during the whole of his story, although the blood had gradually drained from her face.

When Savelyev finished his tale she rose slowly. With a sudden soft cry she fell into her husband's arms.

"Tosya. Tosya ... now, now...." he mumbled helplessly, leading her off into the adjoining room. Her head lay on his shoulder lifelessly, her legs kept buckling. "I know you're strong. And Vasily's alive. He's alive. After all, we don't know.... He'll escape ... or be freed...."

They disappeared into the room. For the next ten minutes Savelyev was alone. He sat there, gazing at the stars burning brightly outside the window. Having told them everything, without holding anything back and understanding the state Kruzhilin and his wife were now in, he still felt relieved at having told them.

Kruzhilin came out of the bedroom and closed the door softly behind him. "It's all right. It's all right," he said absently, "I've given her some drops for her heart." His feet dragged as he went over to the window and then stood there looking out into the dark.

"Thank you, Anton Silantyevich," he finally said in a barely-audible voice. "I don't know whether he'll come through alive or not, but now I know ... I know that he ... that what I put into him hasn't been in vain. That I don't have to be ashamed of him."

"You can be proud of him."

"How did you escape? "

"They marched us off that day, and we were freed on the way by the remnants of Vasily's unit. They were fighting their way out of encirclement and stumbled into our column. It was a fluke."

"Yes, it was. Maybe Vasily ... maybe some unit stumbled into his group, too. What do you think?" There was hope. A child's helpless, impossible hope in Kruzhilin's voice, but it demanded support.

"Who can tell? This is war, and anything can happen."

The stars in the window blinked softly and consolingly. The wall clock in the yellow wooden frame ticked evenly. There was no other sound save this ticking in the whole house.

* * *

As always, Semyon rose early, stepped over Dima and Andrei who were sleeping on the floor, and went down to the Gromotushka to wash.

His mother had the wood stove going in the kitchen and was trying not to clatter as she prepared breakfast. The door to his parents' former bedroom was tightly shut. A large refugee family lived there now: a grandfather and grandmother, their daughter, a youngish woman of about forty-five, and her four children. The eldest of the four, Ganka, was thirteen, and the baby was still at the breast.

Semyon's mother had brought the large family home one evening, thrown open the door to her bedroom and said, "Make yourself at home. We only have one bed in here, though."

The shrivelled, bony grandmother, dressed in a man's dirty jacket, dropped the bundle she was carrying, sank down onto a chair and began to weep. "Thank you. Thank you for your kindness," she sobbed.

"Don't, Mother. Don't cry. Tears are bitter and salty now," her daughter said and turned to Anna. "We'll remember your kindness to our dying day. But where will you live? You've only got but these two rooms and the kitchen."

"My husband'll be away working on the collective

farm till the first snow, and the children and I can share the other room. Then we'll see. We have a big, warm storage room. All it needs is a stove."

"Maybe we can stay there? "

"No. You stay here."

The refugees' family entered timidly and huddled together. The eldest girl, first looked out of one window, then of the other, then turned, raised her coal-black eyes on Semyon boldly and said,

"My name's Ganka. We're Russian, but we come from the Ukraine, near Vinnitsa. Don't you have any apple trees here? "

"No," he replied and went out.

Soon Ganka's mother, Maria Firsova, got a job at the construction site. Now and then Semyon glimpsed her tossing earth up from a foundation pit or mixing cement. That September Ganka went to school. She and his brother Dima were in the same class. However, Semyon rarely saw the new family, for he left early each morning and returned when everyone was asleep.

His mother was pottering about the stove in silence. Ever since the outbreak of war she had become still more introverted, still more sullen.

"What's the matter, Mama? You've become so.... Are you sick? Is anything bothering you? "

"No, I'm not sick," she replied curtly.

One morning, when Semyon was on his way to the Gromotushka to wash up as usual, he saw his mother standing by the fence. Her brother, Makar Kaftanov, was on the other side.

"You can't scare me, Makar," she was saying sadly. "I'm so sick and tired of everything I'll be glad to die. Maybe I'll even ask you to help me."

"What do you mean? "

"You won't understand. That's because you've no brains. You are just a plain, common thief. Don't you have any shame? "

"How d'you like that? I used to be a thief. But now, maybe.... I've been legally released."

"Then hurry up and get yourself back in jail, because I can see that hungry look in your eyes again." She noticed

Semyon then and walked away from the fence.

Semyon did not understand what they had been speaking about, but his uneasiness over his mother's state increased.

One evening his father came home after having been away in the fields for so long. He stamped through the kitchen, flung open the bedroom door, saw the strangers there and stood staring at them for a few moments. "So they've made us take in a family, too?" he said, shedding his dusty clothes in the kitchen.

"Yes," Anna said indifferently.

"But Anfisa told Kirian you brought them here yourself."

"So I did," she replied in the same toneless voice.

"I see. Make the stove in the bathhouse. I'm filthy."

After bathing Fyodor had several glasses of tea in the kitchen in silence. Then he rose. "I'm dry now. It's crowded here, I'll be going. I'll hitch a ride back. Move the roomers into the storeroom. Get a load of clay, Semyon, and put up a stove in the storeroom." And he stamped out.

"What about the storeroom? I can get the clay," Semyon said to his mother.

"You do that. Seven of them living in one room is no good."

Semyon stood beside her for a while and then ventured, "I can see something's bothering you, Mama. Can I help in any way?"

"Oh, leave me alone," she shouted, but the next moment she went up to him, drew his head down to her breast and began stroking his hair as if he were a child. "Forgive me, dear. What can be bothering me except the war? You might be called up any day."

"I wish I was! But they've deferred me."

"What are you saying? Aren't you happy to be home still?"

"How can I look people in the face? Even Maria Firsovna."

His mother sighed.

She was really wonderful, his mother was.

The edge of the sky had just turned blue above Zveni-

gora. There had been no frost yet, but the potato vines had wilted long ago and lay on the ground, invisible in the gloom. The sunflowers beyond the bathhouse formed a solid dark wall and rustled softly, as if whispering among themselves, although there was no hint of a breeze.

The water in the Gromotushka was icy. Semyon splashed about to his heart's content, towelled himself dry, felt around for the heavy dumbbell he had hidden away on the bank and worked out a while. Then he spread his towel on the grass, sat down and lit a cigarette.

"Hey, there, Semyon! " someone yelled.

"What are you yelling about? "

"Nothing." Kolya Iniutin started splashing around.

"I see you've learned how to sail over the fence without making any noise."

"It took practice. The neighbors' tomatoes always ripen before ours do. And some of the neighbors have nice yellow melons. They smell real good. Want me to bring you one? Maybe they haven't picked them all yet."

"Don't you dare! Why aren't you sleeping? "

"Vera keeps tossing around like she's got an itch. And I'm a light sleeper. Let me have a couple of drags. I won't inhale, I'll just puff on it."

"Here."

Kolya drew nearer, but Semyon gave him a fillip on his wet forehead.

"What's the matter? "

"Want another drag? If I catch you smoking, I'll cut your lips off."

"To hell with you," Kolya said in a huff and sat down beside him. He breathed noisily for a while and then said, "You're an ass. You'll let Vera slip through your fingers."

"What? "

"You hear me. You know Yakov Aleinikov? The one with the scar. The guy from the NKVD? He came to ask for her hand."

"What? "

"Ha! Just what I said! " Kolya gloated. He paused and then began his story, interrupting himself to giggle every so often. "It was just like in the movies. First, it was a silent movie. He came over to our house and sat down at

the table, but he didn't say anything. My Ma got as white as a sheet. She was staring at him so hard she even forgot to blink. Vera kept opening and shutting her mouth, and she squirmed into a corner like someone was going to tickle her. Anyway, all Aleinikov kept doing was rubbing his blue scar. And he never said a word. You'd have died laughing. Anyway, then the talkie part began.

"Aleinikov said, 'Pardon me for barging in. I've come on account of Vera....' Boy, Vera squealed just like somebody really was tickling her. Then Aleinikov says,

'I know I'm getting on in years, but I've been observing your daughter.'

"He was saying all this to my Ma. And he said that the reason he'd come was because he liked Vera. He said it wasn't proper for a man of his age to go walking out and all the rest you're supposed to do first, and that's why he said he'd come straight to the point and have it out. And he said he wanted them to think it over and that he wasn't hurrying them. Boy, you should've seen Vera's ears. They got as red as the neighbors' tomatoes, and her cheeks started puffing out. Then she made a dash for it, right out of the house! There! See?"

"Then what?" Semyon choked out the words.

"I don't know. Ma chased me out," he said regretfully. Then, gloating as before, he added, "Ever since then Vera's been tossing around like mad at night. How d'you like that?"

The stub was burning Semyon's fingers, but he didn't notice. He sat there, listening to the gurgling stream, and his mind was a blank. He could not decide whether he was happy or hurt by Aleinikov having come between him and Vera.

"You're not lying, are you?"

"What for? Listen, what about the army? Did you complain to the Secretary about Commissar Grigoriev? You said you would."

"Leave me alone."

"Why? I'm going to complain, too. He chased me out, too."

Kolya often repeated the story of how he had been turned out of the draft board's offices. It happened a week

after the men of the village had left for the front lines. Kolya had gone to the draft board early one morning, had milled around in the hall, and had then stuck his hooked nose around the green padded door. A man with a deeply-pocked face was seated at a desk.

"Hello," Kolya said and rubbed his nose. "I've come to see Commissar Grigoriev. Who's the commissar?"

"Supposing I am?" the man at the desk said.

"My name's Nikolai Iniutin. I've come about being sent to the front lines. I'm a volunteer. I want to know when the next troop train's leaving. And if I have a choice, I'd like to serve in the cavalry."

"I see. Good for you, Nikolai Iniutin. How old are you?"

"Me? I'm eight ... nineteen nearly. I'm big for my age."

"We can see that. Where do you live?"

Kolya told him his address.

Grigoriev rose, came around to him, put his hand on his shoulder and said, "You're a fine fellow, Nikolai. And a great liar, which isn't so good. You'll still have to wait about three or four more years till you're called up. Let's say you do your best in school, and I'll keep you in mind. All right?"

"You mean you won't take me?"

"I mean we won't take you yet. War is no place for children, Comrade Nikolai Iniutin."

"I'm no child!"

"All right. We've agreed about what you're going to do. Now you'll go on home." Grigoriev nudged him gently towards the door.

"I'm going to complain! Hear me?" Kolya shouted as he backed towards the door. "I'll write to Voroshilov, or to Stalin. Or to the District Committee." This last was shouted as he stood in the hall, facing the closed door. He spat at the trampled floor in disgust and trudged off home.

For a while he seemed unable to stop seething, "That bastard! It serves him right to be all pock-marked! Evil people are always marked! He says I've got to wait four more years. That damn glomerate!" he fumed, addressing Dima and Andrei.

"What's a glomerate? " Andrei wanted to know.

"A glomerate? It's like...." Kolya gestured derogatively. "He's even worse than that."

Dima usually listened to Kolya's indignant speeches in silence, tilting his large head as if he were looking for something on the ground. Two or three times, however, he cut his friend short to say, "Shut up. You think the cavalry's waiting for you? They'll call you up when your time comes, and you won't have to remind them." And then he added, "I guess you've forgotten the time Brown Falcon chewed you up."

Andrei, however, questioned him closely and his eyes grew wide. "You mean he didn't believe you were nineteen? "

"Nope."

"And he said war wasn't for children? "

"Yep."

"He said you've got to wait four more years? Is that what he said? " And he walked off, picking his nose and mulling it over. One day he said, "You know, you're stupid, Kolya. Why waste your time going to Grigoriev? He doesn't understand a thing! You just latch on to any train at night and that'll do it."

"What do you mean? "

"It's easy. You know how many trains leave the station? I was there and I saw them. One of them's sure to be going to the front lines."

Semyon had just come up to hear this. He got his brother by the ear and said, "What was that? What train? What're you talking about? Who's going to the front lines? "

Andrei squealed and hopped up and down from pain.

"You just wait! I'll teach you a lesson! See that I don't give you a good spanking." He let go of his brother's ear and turned to Kolya. "That's the last time I want to hear you talking about this! "

Days passed and Kolya referred less and less often to the time he had been kicked out of the draft board office, but the affront apparently welled up within him again now.

The cold grey fog of morning was slowly becoming

lighter, and dark tree tops began appearing from its oozing depths. Semyon felt uneasy and oppressed.

Suddenly, the stillness was broken by a woman's screaming, "Makar! My boy! "

Semyon raised his head. Kolya ran towards Lusha Kashkarova's house, stumbling over the wilted potato vines.

"They've arrested Makar!" he said when Semyon came up to the garden fence. "That takes care of Makar again! I knew it would happen."

Looking over the fence, the only one Semyon could make out in the vague group of people was Anikei Yelizarov who had recently left his job at the machine and tractor station to unexpectedly become a militiaman. Yelizarov was in uniform. It looked as if he was holding a gun.

"Get your mitts off me! And quit shoving! You've got bracelets on me anyway," Makar rasped.

"Shut up! Go on, start walking! "

"What's the charge? You'll be sorry, you rats! "

"Go on! It's hijacking. I found the mobile shop in the Gromotushka Bushes, sonny boy. Too bad you cleaned it out."

"What do I have to do with it? I couldn't have done the job. I don't know how to drive."

"You can tell your story at headquarters. What your part in robbery was and what you did with the goods."

The group of people moved off and disappeared around a corner.

"That was a neat job. You know how they did it? " Kolya said. "Makar made Vitya help them. He told him to go over to the night watchman and say he'd heard something scratching inside the van. Vitya didn't want to, but Makar made him. So he did. And two of them hid behind the van."

"The two of who? "

"I don't know. Vitya said he'd never seen the other man before. Anyway, the watchman went over to the truck and they conked him on the head! Makar dragged him off behind the tents, and his friend opened the cab door, climbed in and drove off. That's how they did it."

Those rats have skeleton keys that'll fit any car or truck."

"How come you know so much?"

"Vitya told me. He made a dash for it while Makar was busy dragging off the watchman. He spent the whole next day in the Gromotushka Bushes, shaking like a leaf. Then, yesterday evening, he came to my house and asked me to give him something to eat. I wanted to know why he couldn't eat at home, and he said he was scared of Makar. Anyway, I got him to tell me the whole story. He's sleeping at our place now. My Ma's on the night shift today, so there's nobody home except me and Vera, and Vitya."

"Does Vera know?"

"Nah. Why tell her? She's a woman, and she might spill the beans and get Vitya in hot water. See that you don't. I'm glad they got Makar, but Vitya isn't to blame. They made him do it."

Semyon ate his breakfast in silence.

"Makar's just been arrested," he finally said.

His mother did not reply.

"They say he and another fellow hijacked the mobile shop."

She said nothing this time, either.

Semyon finished his breakfast and went outside. That day, as on so many others, he would again be making trip after trip to the station for bricks, sheet iron and machinery. As he walked down the still-deserted street, he was not hurrying towards the plant, but towards the militia station when he bumped into Yelizarov.

"Oho, Semyon! Hello there, sonny boy!" Yelizarov exclaimed, offering him his hand, but Semyon seemed not to have noticed. "I see. You don't like the idea of me being in the militia, is that it?"

"You're wrong about that."

"Oh, I know. You think Anikei's trying to dodge the draft. Well, if you'd like to know, I have to risk my life every day on this job. We've just apprehended a dangerous criminal."

"You mean Makar? I saw you."

"Yes, your relative." The threat in his voice was unmistakable. "The rat had a gun concealed under his pillow. I barely managed to wrench it from him."

"You're lying about the gun. Makar's no fool to keep a gun under his pillow. And he was legally released."

"He's always been legally released. You're not trying to defend him by any chance, are you? "

"No. I'm just saying that you're lying about the gun."

"No matter. The main thing is I think I've got him red-handed. Now if I could only sniff out the place he's hidden the goods."

"You do that. Sniff it out. Ask his brother Vitya. Maybe he knows something about it."

"I know what to do without your telling me. He's probably the kid the watchman keep talking about. But he's run off someplace, dammit. I'll ferret him out, though, mark my words! "

Semyon turned towards the building site.

* * *

Two weeks after Anton Savelyev arrived the foundation had been dug for the main buildings of the future plant, cement had been laid for the future shops and then machinery had been set up on the new cement floors. Savelyev, Nechayev, Khokhlov, Savchuk and all the other engineers had been on the job day and night during these two weeks, directing the placing and adjustment of the equipment. They were filthy, unshaven and had all lost weight as they hurried back and forth, issuing orders, explaining and showing the workers what to do. Day and night the air was filled with tractors rumbling, winches screeching, the sound of crane whistles, roaring motors and honking horns until it seemed that the chaos would never end, that there was not and would never be an overall scheme to direct the action.

But then one day steam-driven forges began pounding in one area, making the ground shake, while in another machines began to hum, sending up showers of sparks, and in a third the welders' torches began to hiss. And these noble sounds muted and tamed the many-voiced clatter. Then the brick walls of the factory shops began to appear.

However, they rose slowly, because the shipments of

brick suddenly stopped. Telegrams were dispatched to the regional authorities and to the People's Commissariat, and the replies informed them that shipments would soon be resumed. Meanwhile, the people were working out in the open.

Towards the end of September the mornings were frosty, and then the weather took a turn for the worse. Low-lying clouds moved across the sky, sending down a miserable drizzle. Sometimes it would begin to rain as hard as during a summer thunderstorm, and the wind that accompanied the rain was penetrating. However, the machinery never stopped humming or sending up sparks, and the workers, now drenched to the skin, huddled over them as before, as their icy fingers removed the hot, freshly-milled shell casings from the clamps. The wet metal steamed, and the workers warmed their hands on it.

The construction of dugouts for the workers and their families was going ahead full steam. The excavator shovels swung up and down endlessly, as saws whined and axes thudded.

Polikarp Matveyevich Kruzhilin was a rare visitor at the plant site. He was a rare visitor at home as well, spending most of his time at the various collective farms in the district, although he realized that now, as never before, his wife needed him. However, circumstances were greater than this need. There had been a good harvest that year, but the farms were behind in the mowing and the wind and the rain had whipped the ears, so that the amount of threshed grain had fallen sharply. The terrible perspective ahead was that the district would not meet its state delivery quota.

Early in October Kruzhilin called a bureau meeting to discuss the harvesting and grain deliveries, but no matter how they figured, they still came out short each time. Kruzhilin's frown became ever deeper.

After the bureau meeting Polipov, who seemed just as dissatisfied as he, said, "Well, the first shipment of shells will be ready to leave today. Remember, you nearly got us all in trouble over the plant's deadline? It's a good thing you took my advice then. See how well everything turned out ... unexpectedly? "

"Yes, but at what price? "

"Don't forget this is wartime." Polipov stared out of the dark window and then added, "I know Anton Save-lyev. In fact, we were childhood friends. And we were in the same tsarist prisons."

"I know."

"Who told you? " he asked quickly. "I'll bet it was Subbotin."

"Yes. Did you meet him again?"

"Yes, I did. I found him and his family living quarters. He has a wife and a son. His son's about thirty. He's a lathe operator. But his wife's not well. She's a little touched in the head."

"What do you mean? "

"Not that she's insane. But she's very quiet and melancholy. She was tortured by the Whiteguard security service back in 1918." Polipov rubbed his cheeks. "Yes, time erases everything. We met, but we both felt we had nothing to say to each other. We just talked about how much time had passed and how we'd both changed and gotten older. His wife didn't seem to recognize me at all. She looked at me as if I wasn't even there."

"You mean you knew his wife, too? "

"Oh, yes," Polipov smiled bitterly. "We all grew up on the same street in Novonikolayevsk." He rose. "Don't forget the Executive Committee meets next week. The agenda's pretty big."

"I won't forget. Oh, by the way, I wanted to ask you what one of the questions on the agenda is all about. I mean the one about Comrade Nazarov, Chairman of the Red Wheat Collective Farm."

"So, you've noticed it? Well, you've done that much."

"I don't like the way you said that."

Polipov shrugged his broad, plump shoulders, as if he did not see why Kruzhilin had taken offence. "Perhaps you've noticed then that Nazarov has sown rye on most of his fields, and that's contrary to instructions."

They stood there glaring at each other.

"So far our dear friend Nazarov's farm has delivered less grain to the state than any other farm in the district. And this, at such a time. Besides, how long are we going to

cater to him and let him do whatever he damn pleases? It's about time we put an end to it and relieved him of his job."

"All right, we'll relieve him," Kruzhilin said listlessly and lowered his eyes and sighed. But then suddenly he shot a gaze full of undisguised animosity at the Chairman of the District Executive Committee. "But I'd like to know whether you intend to do the sowing for him and manage the farm for him? Go on, take over, if you're so smart."

Kruzhilin threw down the pencil he was holding. It rolled off the desk. He picked it up and threw it down on the paper again.

"So. I'm beginning to see what you're getting at. So you want to remove me from the district unobtrusively? Thanks for being so frank about it." Polipov's lips turned down in a scowl. "If the Party finds it necessary, I'll take on any job, including a collective farm. And I'll manage it as good as Nazarov."

"You really think so? Why, in a year or eighteen months at the most, you'd ruin it completely," Kruzhilin said speaking more calmly.

"So that's how it is? So I'm not fit to run a farm, either. Where do you want to transfer me then? "

"No place. Go on working where you are for the time being."

"What do you mean for the time being? "

"It's like this. Nobody'll understand us if we clash now."

"Why do you say us? You mean me, don't you? " Polipov butted the air with his large, round head and the right corner of his mouth began to twitch so that he had to raise his hand to cover it. "Well, I want to thank you again for being so frank. When you know your opponent's cards it's always easier to win the game. As you see, I'm being frank with you, too."

"I'm not a gambler, and that's why I have no reason to conceal my hand," Kruzhilin retorted, containing his anger. "I expressly permitted Nazarov to sow half the fields to rye."

Polipov raised his blond eyebrows and his broad forehead became covered with long, shallow furrows. "Do

you actually think you'll be commended by the regional authorities? "

"Perhaps not immediately, but next fall will prove that this was the right thing to do. I gave my permission as part of an experiment, if you wish, although the project does not actually call for experimentation. One has only to look at the figures to see what the rye and wheat yields were this year."

"Can't you understand that rye isn't wheat? "

"And can't you understand that rye is also grain? And that five loaves of rye bread are much better than one loaf of white? Especially now, in wartime. Now then, strike out the question of Nazarov from the agenda. He'll produce more grain this coming year than anyone else. He's completing the mowing now, and everything has been stacked. You take the other farms, where you insisted there be grain deliveries every day. There's no end to what they still have to mow, and there's nothing left to mow except straw now. So you just stop and figure out how much grain has been lost on your account."

"You mean it's my fault? That's pretty smart of you. I didn't have a moment's rest, travelling back and forth throughout the district."

"It's my fault, too. Sure, there was the plant, but I shouldn't have handed over the responsibility of managing the harvesting to you. That was my mistake."

Suddenly Polipov exploded. "Indeed! You're trying to put most of the blame on me, with you in second place? That's very logical! Very fair! Can't you understand that if we hadn't delivered any grain to the state until now, if all the farms in the district had been delivering at the same rate your dear Nazarov is, we'd have been up to our necks in hot water by now. We might even have been expelled from the Party. And, if you care to know, you'd have been expelled first! They wouldn't have let us get away with this in peacetime, but now...."

"Sticks and stones."

"What? What'd you say? How am I to understand that? "

"As a proverb. As part of a tried and true proverb."

Polipov went over to the desk and plopped down into

the armchair in front of it. "There are a lot of proverbs, Kruzhilin. Well, well. Would you like me to tell you something else I've been thinking?"

"Yes, do."

"You were never cut out for Party work."

Kruzhilin looked at him quizzically.

"You mean it's not clear? I've tried to explain about the grain deliveries. Naturally, given this system of deliveries, there are bound to be considerable losses, but I wasn't the one to invent it."

"Which means it's no good."

"That remains to be seen. Soviet power has only been in existence for twenty-three years, and the collective farms have only existed for twelve to fifteen years. It's still too soon to depend completely on the people's good intentions. If we slacken the reins as far as the grain deliveries are concerned, you might find that there won't be any grain, that it's all ended up in the collective farmers' bins, with nothing left over for the State."

"Which means we have no faith in the people."

"That's right. Your good friend Nazarov, judging by rumor, held back some of the farm's crops and divided the harvest up among the collective farmers. He was too sly for me, and I could never catch him red-handed. But I always knew he'd land in jail some day. Well, then, what's the solution? It's in keeping up a good tempo of grain deliveries from the first day of the harvesting and in mowing on time and quickly. It's in seeing to it that everything's done simultaneously, and in ending the mowing before the rains and the wind set in."

"What if we can't manage, because there aren't enough people for the job?"

"We have to. That's what our instructions are based on. And that means they're right."

"I see you're a real theoretician."

"One has to be," Polipov replied in all seriousness. "But you, unfortunately, are not. You keep relying on the peasant's intuition and it can let you down. Or take that old proverb you just quoted. What's the sense of it? Words have all kinds of meanings. You and I can give them different meanings. I heard you got into a lot of trouble once

on account of something you said."

Kruzhilin looked at him with pity. Polipov sensed the meaning of his gaze but ignored it. He sat staring at his broad, round knees.

"Are you trying to threaten me? "

"No, by no means. I think those times have passed. I simply asked you whether you wanted my opinion. I'm just giving you some good advice." Polipov sat back. "If you want to know, though, you're a gambler too, but you play it by ear."

"That's interesting. Tell me more."

"You say we should leave Nazarov alone. Maybe you'll be able to stick up for him and get him off the hook, because you're a big man in the district now that the plant has been put into operation. God knows how, but it's producing shells. Actually, though, the thanks should go to Savelyev and, especially, to Nechayev. Well then, the regional authorities will probably support you. But your good friend Nazarov will get you into trouble some day."

"Meaning? "

"Look at it this way. Say, I don't strike him off the agenda. The matter of his rye fields will make a big stink in the region, but I'll press the matter further and bring up the question of his political views. Assuming there's only rumor to back up the crops he never reported. However, he's been supporting all kinds of people with questionable social backgrounds. Take Ivan Savelyev, for instance, the former Whiteguard bandit. Nazarov let him join the farm, and then Savelyev was arrested as an enemy of the people. But Nazarov went right ahead looking after his family, trying to make their life easy. See? That's the kind of person you're defending." Polipov was speaking unhurriedly, in measured tones.

Kruzhilin listened to what he was saying as calmly and with interest. Polipov's armchair was placed so that Kruzhilin only saw his profile. His small, slightly-protruding ear moved as he spoke. This was the first time Kruzhilin had ever noticed it.

"You know, Polipov, I've a funny feeling that you're a very evil person," Kruzhilin suddenly said, and after he had said it he realized the full meaning of his words and

regretted having spoken as he did.

Polipov's ear stopped moving. He slowly turned bodily to face Kruzhilin, who noticed the way his whole face was twitching and also the fact that Polipov was trying to conceal it with a forced smile. "Not at all. No worse than anyone else," he murmured.

"I can't understand you."

"You're right. It's not easy for many of us to understand each other. We're united by a common idea. We're building a new society. We all see this future society in more or less the same way, and we're doing our best." Unable to overcome the twitching of his face, Polipov leaned forward slightly and looked down. "We're doing our best to achieve it, not exactly by various methods, but while having differing opinions of the people we're working with."

"That's rather vague, isn't it? "

"Take Nazarov, for instance. Don't we have different opinions of him? " His face, at last, stopped twitching. "And who can tell which of us is right? "

The outside door slammed. They heard steps coming down the hall.

"I'm clear on one point, Polipov, Kruzhilin said, staring hard at him. "At least I know now that we'd have a hard time trying to work together. Perhaps, one day, it will simply become impossible."

Polipov frowned again. "Why? This is the first time we've ever spoken so frankly and discovered a bit about each other. Yes, there are some things we don't see eye to eye about. So what? Time will prove which of us is right. As you just said, no one will understand us if we begin to quarrel now."

"But you're the one who's going to start an argument over Nazarov! I want you to know from the start that this is no laughing matter and that it'll be a bitter argument."

The door opened and Savelyev entered. "May I come in? Hello. Am I interrupting anything? I saw a light on and decided to drop in." He strode over to the desk and shook hands with both men. "Why's your hand so clammy, Pyotr? Well, my friends, we're in business! I've just held the thousandth shell to come off the line.

Nechayev's looking after the packing. If he could have his way, he'd pack every shell himself. There's going to be a mass meeting tomorrow morning before the first shipment leaves. Has there been a telegram yet? "

"No, not yet."

"It'd be wonderful if it arrived by morning." He turned to Polipov. "Well, Pyotr! I was beginning to forget you. To tell you the truth, I hadn't thought of you in at least a dozen years. And here we are, together again! But there's no time to talk. Thanks for the apartment. We're living like royalty. I even feel embarrassed. After all, look at how the workers are still living."

"Don't forget you're the director of the plant."

"Tell me about yourself. Where've you been? What've you been doing? "

"Well, after I escaped from the Whiteguard security service prison—I don't think you've forgotten Sviridov, have you? —I served in the Red Army until about 1930. I was in Novosibirsk after that, and then I was transferred here. That's about all. It's been an untroubled life," Polipov said and smiled wryly.

"We should get together some day and talk over old times."

"How's Liza? "

"More or less all right. Her health isn't any too good."

The outside door slammed again. They turned their heads.

"Maybe it's a telegram," Savelyev said.

For a moment or two everything was still, then they heard hurried steps. They rose in unison, realizing that it really was the eagerly-awaited telegram.

A young woman burst into the room. She was excited and flushed. "Here, Polikarp Matveyevich. Here's an official one from Moscow. The other's from the Regional Committee. Congratulations! "

Kruzhilin unfolded the first one, and for some reason did not read the text but began with the addresses: "Kruzhilin, Secretary of the Shantara District Party Committee, Polipov, Chairman of the District Executive Committee, Savelyev, plant director, Nechayev, chief engineer...."

"Well, I'll be going," Polipov said and rose unexpectedly. "Congratulations, Anton. You've done a great job. I'll see you at the meeting tomorrow."

Then he turned to Kruzhilin. "Do I strike the question of Nazarov from the agenda then?"

"You'll have to decide that for yourself."

Polipov left, closing the door tightly behind him.

After both telegrams had been read, Kruzhilin and Savelyev looked at each other in silence.

"Well, Polikarp," Savelyev said at last in a tired voice. "I still can't believe we did it." He was badly in need of a shave. His eyes were sunken, his face was drawn.

"How much sleep did you get these past two weeks?"

"You're right. I'm going straight to bed. And I need a shave. It's disgraceful." He shook his head to clear it and took his hands from the desk, rising with difficulty. Then he began walking up and down, and Kruzhilin realized that he was afraid to sleep.

"I'm sure you know that our forces surrendered Orel today," Anton said softly, walking over to the flag-dotted wall map. The entire Western part of the Soviet Union was criss-crossed by blue pencil marks, indicating former front lines. Now the easternmost line began at Leningrad and went down, bypassing Moscow to Orel, Kursk, Kharkov and Dniepropetrovsk, then swerving slightly to the west, to the Perekop Isthmus. Odessa, circled in red, was an island far in the enemy's rear. There, within the circle, tens of thousands of Red Army men and Soviet civilians had been waging a battle to the death for nearly eight weeks, defending the city from the enemy.

Odessa was doomed. Every Soviet person understood this, as did Savelyev, who stared at the map and then closed his eyes and tried to imagine what things were like in Odessa that minute. He had no difficulty in imagining it. His memory immediately recreated the crimson sky above the burning city, a building crumbling and settling in billows of dust, a woman's screams, a child wailing.

He lurched, either from the sound of the screams or from the smell of the burning which came to him so clearly suddenly, and thrust his hands against the wall to keep from falling.

"Anton! " he heard Kruzhilin cry and saw him bound to his side.

"I'm all right. Your map needs correcting. The front lines have moved." He took out a pin with a paper flag on it and moved it to just east of Orel.

"I know. It needs correcting every morning," Kruzhilin said bitterly. He stood beside Savelyev, staring at the map, too. "I've been wanting to ask you something, Anton. How could the Germans have smashed through all our fortifications along our new borders as if they'd never existed? The Western regions of the Ukraine and Byelorussia were reunited with the country in '39. I heard that there were strong fortifications put up along the new borders, but the Germans went through them like a knife through butter. How come? You've lived there, you should know."

"Yes, I did, but I'm a civilian. Where's Pyotr? Is he gone? That old shopkeeper! You know, his father was a rich merchant in Novonikolayevsk before the revolution."

Kruzhilin saw that Savelyev wanted to change the subject and so walked back to his desk. "I know. He's never denied it. You might say I have shopkeeping in my background, too, because I was a clerk when I was a boy." He paused and then he added, "If you have a chance, I'd like you to tell me whatever you can about what Polipov was like in those days."

"What can I say? He was a very ordinary boy. He went to a private secondary school. Then he got caught up in the revolutionary struggle and became a real Bolshevik. He was arrested several times and imprisoned. He was a faithful comrade. We were only enemies in one respect. That was in love."

"Indeed? " Kruzhilin sat up.

Savelyev looked at him and did not like the expression in his eyes. "Yes. We both fell in love with Liza, my wife. But why'd you ask? "

"And she chose you," Kruzhilin said, as if he had not heard Savelyev's question.

"Yes, that's how it all turned out. I was really a devil when I was a kid. And as a young fellow, too. Maybe that's what charmed her. Girls go for that in the beginning. That

was back in Novonikolayevsk. I was living with my uncle then. He joined the underground revolutionary movement way back in 1902. And I think he was the organizer of the first Social Democratic group there. His son, my cousin, was also a revolutionary, and so was Liza. Naturally, they didn't take me into their confidence, and that burned me up. I kept thinking up ways to prove that I wasn't the fool they thought I was." As Savelyev talked on his lids kept drooping.

"Why don't you go home to bed," Kruzhilin said.

"Yes, you're right. I'll tell you about Polipov later, and something about myself, too, if you want me to."

* * *

Fyodor Savelyev greeted the news of his elder brother's return to Shantara with seeming indifference. When Pankrat Nazarov told him about it, he raised his weary eyes and frowned.

In the mornings, when the cold sunrise tinted the eastern sky a bloody red, he would yank the thin, grimy blanket marked with cigarette burns off Kirian Iniutin and the two of them would proceed in silence to the combine, spend about three minutes poking about, Iniutin in the tractor motor and Fyodor in the combine motor, and by the fourth minute Fyodor would pull the whistle and they'd begin working.

When the dew fell in the evening Fyodor would pull the whistle three times in a row, which meant the end of work, but not of the workday. Each of them pottered about his machine for about an hour more after wiping off the dust and greasing the various parts, because Fyodor insisted on the motors being kept clean. Then they would go to the field kitchen with Fyodor leading the way and Kirian about ten or twenty steps behind. Neither would have said a word in all this time.

One day about two weeks later, when it had been drizzling miserably since morning and the rain seemed to have fought its way through the burgeoning, ragged clouds, Kirian said, looking out through the grimy window of the

mobile repair shed at the depressing, muddy fields, "Even if it stops raining by tonight the mud won't dry till the day after tomorrow. What do you say about going home meanwhile? "

"What's the matter? Miss your wife all of a sudden? " Fyodor did not even try to conceal the mockery in his voice.

Iniutin had never spoken back to Fyodor in his life, but now, feeling the blood rush to his head he muttered, "Maybe you do, too."

The plank bed creaked. Fyodor sat up. Although Kirian did not turn his head from the window, he felt Fyodor's scathing eyes on him. His arms and hands seemed to fill with lead, and he realized that if Fyodor said one more word as tauntingly or insinuatingly, he would rush at his one-time friend, get his hands around his dirty, stubble-covered neck and choke him to death. Iniutin dug his nails into the cold, damp wood of the window frame. Then, to prevent Fyodor from uttering a last, fateful word, he said, "It'd give you a chance to see your brother."

"Time enough for that later."

The bed creaked again, and Kirian guessed that Fyodor had lain back.

Yakov Aleinikov, of all people, was the one to tell Ivan Savelyev about his elder brother's arrival. Yakov was driving by in a gig, just like the one he had driven up to the meadow on that fateful day so long ago, to take Ivan away. Perhaps it was the very same one. Ivan was standing on the slope. The herd was grazing nearby.

"Come over here," Aleinikov said, pulling up.

Ivan had on a raincoat and boots that crunched on the dry grass as he came down the slope. The long whip that was slung over his shoulder dragged along behind like a snake and rattled.

They spoke in short phrases, and if a stranger had overheard the conversation he would not have understood it.

"Hello," Aleinikov said.

"Hello."

"So you recognize me? "

"I've never forgotten you. I even dreamt of you."

"I know you have a grudge against me." The way Aleinikov said it one might have thought they were indeed discussing some trifling affront. Aleinikov even sighed regretfully.

Ivan did not immediately reply. He looked over at the herd, then said: "No, I don't."

Aleinikov cast a sharp glance at him and then looked away. "All right. So you're tending the herd? "

"I want to be where I can be alone for a while."

"I see." Aleinikov was about to drive on when Ivan said, "Aren't you afraid I might sneak off with a couple of cows? See how many there are."

"No, I'm not."

"Much obliged. What about Arkady Molchanov? Where is he? "

Aleinikov shrugged. He seemed puzzled by the question. "Why, in jail."

"What for? "

Aleinikov looked up at the autumn sky at length, watching the low clouds stream silently overhead. He did not answer Ivan's question. Instead he said, and his former belligerent tone was gone, "Have you heard from your draft board yet? "

"No. I'm not volunteering. If they call me up, I'll go."

"All right. I have to be going. Oh, yes, your bother Anton asked me to say hello if I saw you."

"Who? " Ivan came closer.

"Anton. Don't you know he's been made the director of the plant that's been evacuated here? He arrived a few days ago."

"Anton? "

"Yes, Anton Savelyev."

"Thanks. Thanks ever so much! "

"He said he'd like you to drop in to see him whenever you get a chance."

Ivan stood looking after Aleinikov for quite some time.

"Guess who's the director of the new plant? " he said to his wife that evening. "My brother Anton! "

Agata's braids swung as she spun around to face him. He could not tell whether her expression was one of fear or amazement, for in that first instant she seemed unable



to decide whether this was good news or bad, whether it was a threat to her husband or not. "But ... what'll we do? You've got to see each other! "

"Sure, we do. I'll get Pankrat to relieve me for a while."

One morning several days later Ivan set out for Shantara, but did not find Anton at home. His wife Liza, a shrivelled woman, ran her faded green eyes over him fearfully, yet when she finally spoke her voice was friendly.

"Won't you come in? I'm expecting Anton back at about ten. He hasn't had his breakfast yet."

Yura, Anton's son, seemed about twenty, although he was actually twenty-seven. He was slim and agile, and he had his mother's green eyes. At the sight of Ivan he exclaimed, "Hey! You sure are my uncle! You don't need any identification to prove it. You and Dad could be twins! Dad's gone off to the station, but we can have some tea, meanwhile. Then I'll be going to work, but you stay and wait for him."

Yura had just washed up and was walking up and down the little room in his shorts and undershirt, rubbing his face and arms with a towel.

Liza poured out the tea and asked Ivan about his family. Yura kept interrupting her to tell him in detail of their life in Kharkov and his experiences when he had arrived in Lvov on the very day war had broken out.

"We're working out in the open over at the plant now. Nechayev, the chief engineer, says, 'Don't worry, boys. Hang on for a while, we'll have the shops built before winter sets in.' But I doubt that very much. It's not too bad now, but I don't know how we'll manage when it gets cold. We lathe operators know what cold metal's like. Your hands stick to it."

Ivan's general impression of Anton's wife was favorable, although it was not so of his son. Yura never stopped talking for a moment, and the familiar way in which he addressed Ivan from the start made him feel a bit uneasy.

Having downed several cups of tea, Yura jumped up and said, "Be seeing you, Unc. I'm off to work."

Ivan did not know how to take this "Unc.". Had Yura meant it in a kindred way, or was there a hint of sarcasm in it?

The telephone rung. Liza picked up the receiver, listened without speaking for some time and then said, "All right, Anton. Don't worry, go on. But ... your brother Ivan's right here. He's come to see you."

Ivan took the receiver nervously. The conversation was jumbled. The voice in the phone was that of a stranger. Ivan could not tell whether the noise was coming from the receiver or whether it was a buzzing in his own ear. One thing was clear, however: Anton was at the station and was leaving for Novosibirsk. He would be back in a week.

"That's all right. Never mind. I'll get the chairman to let me off again," Ivan shouted into the phone.

"And bring your wife. Be sure to bring your wife," he made Anton's words out through the buzzing and static.

"All right. I will."

However, his second trip to Shantara was a long time in the coming. That very evening Nazarov met him by the cow pen. He waited until Ivan had shut the gate after the last cow to say,

"Have you had your fill of steppe air? You can send your boy out to tend the herd tomorrow."

"But what about school? "

"One day Volodya can tend the herd, and the next day another boy can, and the third day a third boy can."

Ivan sat down on the edge of the trough by the fence and waited to see what would come next.

"I've taken everyone I could off their jobs and sent them to the threshing floor and on to the wagon trains to deliver the grain," Nazarov continued. "We'll have to deliver everything we can, down to the last kernel this year. I'd never have gone over our quota for anything in the world if Kruzhilin hadn't asked me to get the district out of the red. And if not for the war. Which means we'll have to struggle through the winter on potatoes. And the problem now is to get them out of the ground before the rains set in. You know what digging potatoes in the mud means. What I'm getting at is that I'm putting you in charge of our potato crop. I'll give you a team of about ten women. And the schoolboys will help, too. I'll talk it over with the principal. I'll ask him to let about twenty boys off every day in turn. After all, they've got to study, too,"

he concluded and sighed.

There was a large potato crop and they were busy digging practically until the middle of October, carrying the potatoes in pails and buckets, piling them in large mounds on the ground, covering the mounds with straw, branches and sheets of canvas. Since all the remaining farm horses were being used for threshing and delivering the grain to the granaries, there were none to take the potatoes to the storehouse.

"They'll freeze," Ivan would say to Nazarov whenever the chairman stopped by the fields.

Nazarov would take in the mounds of potatoes, the women and children with earth-covered hands and feet, he'd cough hoarsely and say, "Anything can happen."

Ever since Nazarov had had some word about his son, and they said Kruzhilin had told him, his face had become progressively more ashen. He began wasting away. His old canvas raincoat was soon hanging loosely from his shoulders, flapping more visibly on his frame as the days went by. Once, after a fit of coughing, Nazarov spat and Ivan noticed the bright-red streaks in the spittle. The old chairman quickly rubbed the blob out with his boot.

"Don't make extra trips when you don't have to," Ivan said. "Take care of yourself some. Otherwise...."

"Anything can happen," Nazarov replied as indifferently as before, speaking just as hoarsely.

In all this time Ivan had not dreamed of mentioning another trip to Shantara. He knew that Fyodor was driving a combine, mowing the farms' fields someplace, but had never yet come across him and had no desire to do so. While tending the herd he had occasionally caught sight of the combine and his brother's shape on the bridge, and each time he had taken the herd farther away.

At last, Nazarov assigned six carts to take the potatoes out of the fields. He arrived in one of them, jumped down and shouted to Ivan,

"Get a move on you! Maybe God's on our side. Maybe He'll give us a few more dry days."

God was apparently doing His utmost. Cold, dirty-looking clouds, heavy with rain and snow hung menacingly above the earth. A biting wind whipped across the ground,

carrying bunches of dry birch leaves into the dug-up potato field from a nearby copse and depositing them in the holes in the grounds.

"Have you mown all wheat and rye?" Ivan asked.

"To all intents and purposes. There's just a bit left. Your brother Fyodor'll mow it this coming week."

"How is he?" This was the first time since his return that Ivan had spoken of him.

"All right, I guess. He's working hard."

The women and children were quickly loading the carts, while the horses stood there wearily, their flat-cheeked heads drooping.

"The poor beasts have had a hard time this year," Pankrat said. "I sent some men with scythes and some women with sickles over to a strip of standing wheat yesterday, figuring they'd get it done quickly, but Fyodor was at me for it, saying he'd do it himself. That's because he's so greedy to make money. I don't know why he's like that. Well, I said to hell with him, let him mow the strip, too. There won't be much grain there anyway, it all been blown out by the wind, so I'll spare the people. It's easier to mow straw than grain, and Fyodor gets paid by the hectare."

"Who drives the tractor for him? Is Kirian Iniutin still with him?" Ivan asked.

"Yes, I don't think they've spoken two words to each other ever since the mowing began. They're both as mad as hornets. It won't take much to make the fur fly there."

"How come?"

"Who the hell knows?"

The carts were loaded. Ivan wanted to send them on their way, but Nazarov said,

"You go on along with them. Agata has the oven going in the bathhouse. You can wash off the dirt and both of you can go in to Shantara. Your brother Anton phoned the farm office and invited you both over to his house this evening. A truck's leaving for the granary this evening, so you can hitch a ride in. I'll manage here meanwhile. Be back by tomorrow."

"All right."

"You be sure to go. It'll do you good to get together

and have a good talk.”

Pankrat began to cough. Then he added, “He’s invited Fyodor over, too.”

“What?”

“What’s the matter? He won’t kill you, will he? Go on. It’ll be a good reunion.” Then, seeing that Ivan hesitated, he raised his voice and said: “I said go on!”

* * *

“So that’s what you’re like, Ivan!” Anton exclaimed, embracing his brother, holding him off at arm’s length, looking him in the eye and embracing him again. “And this is Agata? You know, I imagined your wife like this. Come on, take off your things. Liza, show them where to hang their coats.”

The four of them were standing in the small kitchen and crowding it. A naked bulb filled the room with bright light, and in this light Agata felt as if she had been bathing and had come out of the water nude to find herself amidst a crowd of people.

“No, Ivan, time doesn’t spare anyone,” Anton said sadly as he gazed at his brother. “I remember you as a tow-headed kid. When was the last time I saw you?”

“When you were hiding out from the gendarmes in Mikhailovka, and then out at Zvenigora.”

“When was that? Let’s see ... it must have been about four years after the 1905 revolution. Yes, I was caught in 1906 and then again in 1909.”

“That was in 1910.”

“You’re right. Which makes it thirty-one years ago.”

As Agata gazed at the brothers something seemed to be squeezing her heart softly. Her eyes stung, and the electric light became blurred, as all the while a nagging thought gave her no peace: “Fyodor’ll be here soon. He and Ivan are going to meet here.”

As she had been ironing Ivan’s shirt before leaving for Anton’s house, she had said for what was probably the tenth time, “Maybe I’d better stay home, Ivan. There’s really no reason for me to go.”

"Never mind. You come along."

Then, staring out the window, she had said as her nostrils had flared, "You don't know me. If Fyodor says a single bad word about you, I'll kill him right there and then."

"Agata! "

She started visibly, took a deep breath and said, "All right. Let's go. I'll try to keep my temper."

"Hello, Agata," Anton's wife said. She was standing beside her and smiling.

"Hello."

"My name is Liza. I'm so glad we've finally met. Come on in." She threw open the double doors leading to an adjacent room. "Some of Anton's friends are here. Fyodor'll be along soon."

Hearing that Fyodor had not yet arrived, Agata felt relieved and entered the large room boldly.

A table had been set in the middle of the room. Two men she had never seen before were sitting on a couch by the wall and a third, whom she knew, Kruzhilin, was walking up and down and speaking. At the sight of the newcomers he fell silent, stared at Ivan for a few moments, then smiled and offered him his hand.

"Hello, Ivan Silantyevich," he said simply.

The other two rose and also greeted them. The thin man was Nechayev and the short, plump one was Khokhlov. Both looked at Ivan with interest.

"They know he's been in jail! What if they start asking him why he was arrested and all sorts of questions?" Agata wondered anxiously. She instinctively moved closer to her husband, as if she could shield him bodily from their questions.

However, neither Khokhlov nor Nechayev said anything.

"Let's sit down," Anton suggested, pulling some chairs out from around the table.

"But Fyodor and his wife aren't here yet," Liza objected.

"This is wartime, and no time to waste time. They'll join us whenever they come."

"I see nobody really cares if we're here or not," a voice

boomed in the kitchen. Standing in the doorway in an unbuttoned quilted jacket and holding his sheepskin hat was Fyodor. A tall woman dressed in a dark blue coat stood behind him. The noise of chairs scraping and the hum of voices had obscured the sound of their entrance.

For two or three moments Anton stood staring at his middle brother through the open doorway. Fyodor, too, was sizing him up with eyes that were cold, unblinking and expectant.

"Fyodor?" Anton said quizzically, as if he still doubted it. He strode towards the kitchen.

The brothers embraced. Liza hurried over to them.

A moment later, as Anton led Fyodor to the table, he said, although without a trace of reproach, "This won't do at all. I've been here for over a month, and you haven't once come near Shantara. Ivan here came to see me, even though I wasn't home at the time."

"I didn't have a minute I could call my own. This is harvesting time. Besides, I'm sure you had no time for me, either."

Fyodor shook Kruzhilin's hand firmly, said, "Hello, Polikarp," as to an old friend, then greeted Khokhlov and Nechayev, whom he first examined quickly, and then held out his broad hand that was as hard as iron.

"That's some grip!" Nechayev said and smiled. "You don't bend horse-shoes with your bare hands by any chance, do you?"

"I can," Fyodor replied shortly and looked around as if to see if there was anyone else he had not greeted. His smouldering eyes slipped over Ivan as if there were no one standing there. Anton saw the muscles bunch under Ivan's thin cheeks. Agata's brows twitched, and Kruzhilin dragged on his cigarette as his eyes went from Fyodor to Ivan. Nechayev and Khokhlov were the only ones who did not find anything amiss in Fyodor's behavior, thinking that he and Ivan probably saw each other several times a day, which made it unnecessary for them to greet each other here.

Anna said hello to everyone when she entered the room, not singling anyone out. Then she turned her head to Ivan slowly and stood looking at him, twining and

untwining her trembling fingers.

"Hello, Anna," Agata said. "Vanya's back again."

"I'm glad. At last! Hello, Ivan," Anna said, taking a step towards him and holding out both hands.

For a moment Anton felt that Fyodor would lunge at his wife, grab her by the collar or by the hair and fling her away from Ivan, for Fyodor's eyes, though hidden by his shaggy brows, had flared up dangerously. That was why Anton said hastily,

"Come on, sit down, everybody! You come and sit by me, Ivan. And you, too, Fyodor. Since you're older than Ivan, you sit on my right."

"I say! We're going to have a real party! " Khokhlov exclaimed, rubbed his hands and was the first to pull a chair up to the table. He began pouring vodka into their wine glasses. "I've forgotten what vodka smells like. According to the old tradition, we raise our glasses to toast the master of the house first."

"There are many things we can drink to, my friends," Anton said, raising his glass. "First of all, let's drink to victory and to chasing the fascist scum from our land in the very near future. My friends, none of you really know what the nazis are like. I do, if only a little, because I had a chance to experience it first-hand. And let's drink to us brothers being finally reunited. As the old saying goes, there'd be no good fortune if misfortune hadn't helped. I'm glad we're all together again. Let's drink to all of this."

They drained their glasses, all except Fyodor, who was still holding his and staring at the cold, colorless, shimmering liquid. "I don't think we'll be all together for long," he said.

No one thought these words strange, for this was wartime, and each and every one of them might at any time find himself far from Shantara. However, Fyodor paused for a moment as his eyes went from one to the other of the people around the table, and he added, "And it's really nothing to be sorry about."

"Fyodor! " Anna exclaimed.

He brushed her off listlessly and downed his glass in a gulp, so that it seemed he had poured the contents over his shoulder.

A stillness settled over the room. No knife or fork scraped a single plate. Kruzhilin was sitting across from Anton, who now caught him once again looking from one brother to the other.

"Please help yourselves, everybody," Liza said, rising slightly. "Fill everyone's glasses, Anton."

"Let's not forget the old saying: a drunken man will have a clear head in the morning, but a fool won't ever," Anton said as he lifted the bottle.

"No, thanks. No more for me," Khokhlov said hastily. "I'm not really a drinking man." Indeed, his face was flaming after having had but a single drink. He kept mopping his damp brow. He kept blinking his kindly eyes to keep them open.

"Never mind, you can put away one more drink," Kruzhilin said.

"There's something I'd like to say." He raised his glass. "Life is very strange. Sometimes you understand it, and sometimes you don't."

"You're the one person who always has to understand it. As a matter of duty," Fyodor said.

"Me? You don't think I was marked by some special sign at birth, do you? I'm made of the same stuff as everybody else. As Anton, Ivan and you, Fyodor. And sometimes, unfortunately, all too often, a person won't understand the meaning of this life and will do God knows what, kick up a fuss and smash his soul so hard he has to go on living with it all battered and bruised."

Kruzhilin spoke slowly, enunciating each word, and as he progressed Ivan, who was taking all this to be addressed to him personally, lowered his head more and more. His hand that had been lying on the table began to tremble. He quickly removed it and gripped his knee under the cloth, only to feel his wife's hard, moist hand cover his own. Her fingers, too, were trembling.

At first, Fyodor listened to what Kruzhilin was saying with a condescending smile. Then the smile began to vanish. His mouth became hard and an icy glitter touched his eyes.

"Luckily, man has been blessed with intelligence," Kruzhilin continued, looking straight at Fyodor. "That's

why he's a human being. And sooner or later he'll begin thinking about the meaning of life, the life of his fellow-men, of society and his own actions and deeds. A powerful, compelling, eternal call to life, an eternal desire to find his own place in life is what forces him to do this. And I believe that from this moment on a person, no matter what mistakes he may have made, becomes a true member of the society in which he lives, a defender of justice, human dignity and happiness. And so, my friends, let's drink to this noble, eternal call and to each and every one of us being aware of it within ourselves always."

Ivan felt Agata stroking his hand. Once again Fyodor was in no hurry to drink, but seemed lost in thought as his huge hand gripped the fragile glass. Everyone seemed to have forgotten about him, and the conversation turned to other topics.

Suddenly, Nechayev rose, his head nearly grazing the light bulb. He said to Liza, "Thank you for your hospitality. I'd like to stay, but I've got to get back to the plant. The evening shift will be arriving shortly."

Liza went out to the kitchen to see him off.

Nechayev put on his coat, spoke to her, then bent over and kissed her hand. Fyodor, who sat facing the door, frowned in displeasure.

"What if a person never does bother to think about the meaning of it?" he suddenly asked, turning to Kruzhilin. "I mean the meaning of life in general, and his own life? Say, he just goes on living from one day to the next as he likes. What then?"

"Then?" Kruzhilin did not immediately reply. A long and oppressive silence ensued, and Fyodor sensed that not only he, but everyone present was waiting to see what Kruzhilin would say. "Then things turn out according to another old saying: a rip in time becomes a hole."

"I see," Fyodor sounded as if he was pleased. He reached out for the bottle without being asked.

"Fyodor...." Anna murmured.

"What?" He shrugged her off, poured himself a drink and downed it, paying no attention to anyone.

Anna smiled uneasily at Kruzhilin and then looked away. Her ear lobes flamed like cherries.

About two hours before Fyodor had come home straight from the fields, dirty and in need of a shave. He did not even greet her as he entered but said, "I've got to shave and wash. Heat some water, and hurry." He shaved in silence. As he was washing his face at the tap and snorting he said, "Are you ready? I guess you got a personal invitation to go to Anton's, too."

"You could've at least said hello when you came in."

"What for? You're just waiting for me to be called up. That's in the first place. And you hope I'll get killed out there. That's in the second. Which means we're just as good as strangers."

"Even strangers say hello to each other when they meet."

Fyodor was putting on a clean shirt in front of the mirror and was having trouble with a button.

"Nobody knows whether I'll be called up, or whether I'll be killed if I am, but I can tell you for sure that sooner or later you and me are going to get divorced. Since that's what you want."

"But you were the one You"

"Ah, dry up! " He suddenly changed the subject. "When Nazarov told me Anton was inviting me over, I felt like shutting him up."

"Why do you always feel like shutting everybody up? I wish I knew. After all, he's your brother! You haven't seen him since you were a boy."

He continued, paying no attention to what she had just said. "That lousy jailbird is sure to be there, too. Well, I decided I might as well go. I'll have a look at my brother and sit at the table with a counter-revolutionary for once in my life. Maybe the dirt won't rub off on me. Get dressed."

"I'm not going."

"What d' you mean? Come on, hurry! You're still my wife. Do you want to start arguing now? There's strangers in the other room, in case you've forgotten."

Hating herself for something, for her lack of will, perhaps, for her indecisiveness and subservience, she went to the chest for her new dress. "Please don't start any trouble there."

“What’s the matter? Worried about your precious Ivan? ”

Thus did they approach Anton’s house.

Fyodor glanced occasionally at his wife’s flaming ears, at Ivan, who had been silent throughout, but did not utter another word. He sat there listening indifferently to Anton, Kruzhilin and Khokhlov discuss plant business, the construction of dugouts and a trip to the regional center to see about shipments of timber for the future houses. Liza kept offering Anna and Agata second helpings. Every now and then Fyodor would pour himself another drink, but the liquor was not going to his head.

At last, Kruzhilin looked at his watch, exclaimed and rose. “As you said, Anton, a drunk will sleep it off by morning, but not a fool. Even though I don’t think we belong to the second category, we’ll still need some time to sleep it off.”

Khokhlov and Anton also rose and they went to the kitchen in a noisy group. Ivan and Fyodor made as if to rise, but Anton said,

“Stay on a while. There’s so much I want to talk to you about.”

Fyodor merely smiled crookedly and began doodling on the tablecloth with his fork.

Having seen his guests to the door, Anton returned to the table, sat down in Kruzhilin’s seat, smiled amiably as he looked from Fyodor to Ivan, Agata and Anna. He smiled, but said nothing.

“What’s the use wasting time smiling? ” Fyodor said and his damp moustache twitched. “Polikarp Kruzhilin just lectured me, so now it’s your turn.”

“You know, I just can’t believe we’ve all finally got together,” Anton said. “Can you believe it, Liza? Maybe I’m dreaming. Here’s Ivan, and here’s Fyodor. That’s how I remembered them all these years: Ivan was always skinny and as lively as a cricket, and always had a sunburned, peeling nose. And Fyodor was always solemn, always thinking things over before he’d do anything. And a real handsome fellow. I’ll bet all the girls chased

after him, didn't they, Anna?"

Anna smiled sadly, but did not reply. Liza, meanwhile, removed the extra plates and glasses.

"There's no end to all we have to talk over," Anton sighed and reached for the bottle. "At least we're all in the same village now, so we'll be able to see each other often. I'd like to drink to Ivan, our youngest brother. Kruzhilin was right when he said that life is a strange thing and not everyone can get to the gist of it from the start. That's why it's knocked Ivan around and given him a bad shaking up, like the water knocking the rocks around at the Gromotukha rapids. But I think everything'll be all right now. Fyodor here said something about a man's position. If a man's a human being to begin with, everything'll turn out all right sooner or later. Here's to you, Ivan."

"Thanks, Anton," Ivan replied in a choked voice.

"I'm not going to drink to this damn counter-revolutionary," Fyodor snapped.

Agata turned pale. Her body tensed as she clutched Ivan's shoulder. For the third time that evening Anna cried,

"Fyodor! "

"What do you keep shouting Fyodor for all the time?" he bellowed, turning to face his wife. "Don't worry, I won't lay a finger on your darling Ivan! When the time comes, the State'll pack him off again. And let's hope it'll be for good then! So you'll just have to excuse me if I don't feel like drinking to him. It's about all I can take to just be sitting at the same table with him."

Anna lurched away and jumped up, knocking over her chair.

"Anna ... Anna! " Liza hurried after her into the kitchen.

Anna was frantically tying on her shawl as the tears coursed down her cheeks. She practically pushed Liza away as she sobbed, "No! No! No! " There was nothing but hatred in her voice.

Anton stood by the table, staring across the room into the kitchen. Ivan half-rose, then sat down again. Fyodor alone seemed insensible to what was going on.

After Anna dashed out Liza rubbed her temples, as if

trying to recall something. Then she murmured "Oh, yes, the tea. I'll be right in."

"Would you go and help her, please?" Anton said to Agata.

Agata rose, went out to the kitchen and closed the door behind her.

"This has been a grand family reunion, hasn't it?" Anton said.

"What'd you expect? Did you want me to kiss him? I guess you knew how I felt about Ivan, and if you didn't you do now."

"Why do you feel like this?"

"Ha! My dear brother, I shed my blood and risked my life to establish Soviet power."

"I'd say I did, too."

"Hm. But that was far away from here. I risked mine here. And right here is where Ivan took up with the bandits. Ma and Pa were killed here in Mikhailovka. But Ivan still went on serving under them. You think I can ever forgive him? It seems like you did. And Kruzhilin, too. Look at all those fancy toasts: a person's got to understand the meaning of life, and then you say he's going to be a human being. All that's only to justify Ivan. All right, go ahead. That's your business. But do you think he understood anything?"

"Maybe that toast was to you, too," Anton said softly. "So that you might try to find the meaning of life, too."

"Sure, it was for my benefit, too. I understood that. I'm not that dumb. The only thing is, I never lost it."

"What if you did? What if you lost it someplace along the way?"

"That's a nice way of putting it!" Fyodor stood up swiftly, glowered at Anton and then at Ivan. "Ah, what's the use wasting time like this?" And he stamped out to the kitchen.

Anton said nothing. He did not call him back. A moment later the outside door slammed.

"What's the matter, Ivan? Why haven't you said a word all evening?"

"What can I say? Fyodor's right. There's nothing I can say in my defense. You know how my life turned out. I

wrote you a couple of times, and so did Agata. And other people must have told you about me."

"But I want to hear what *you* have to say. And don't leave anything out. Tell me about yourself and about Fyodor. Tell me everything. I want to understand you both."

"I can tell you about myself, but what can I say about Fyodor? I can't understand him, either."

"Well, as best as you can. And then I'll tell you about myself."

The brothers stayed up talking all through the night.

* * *

Having stalked out of Anton's house, Fyodor stood by the porch for a while. The darkness of the autumn night seemed to be pressing Shantara to the ground. Here and there the yellow spots of lighted windows dotted the darkness.

But an hour or two before, when he and Anna had been on their way to Anton's house, the sky had been covered with heavy, dirty gray clouds moving high above the earth. Now, however, and Fyodor sensed this, they were very low, sending down waves of cold air. He wondered whether it would snow and thought of the small field of wheat that had not yet been harvested. "If it snows I'll never hear the end of it. They'll be saying I was living it up and drinking instead of harvesting till the first snow."

He hurried off into the darkness.

The wind was making the bare trees sway, and the stiff branches creaked mournfully. It seemed that the heavy clouds were scraping the tree-tops, ready to snap them off.

Fyodor felt nothing but dislike for Anton, and more than that for Ivan. He remembered Anna accusing him of hating everyone, when actually the one she had really meant was Ivan. What did she see in that skinny jailbird? Look at all the years that had gone by, but she still couldn't get him out of her mind. Or was it true when they said that people adored Christ for His suffering? And now Polikarp and Anton were trying to teach him how to live!

The street was black. There was not a single light on anywhere, nor a single star overhead. His own house was plunged in darkness. "Ha! She's not even waiting up," he said to himself grimly as he thought of Anna. "I remember the time she used to sit up all night, waiting for me." Once again he felt his head spinning from irritation.

From the yard he saw a light in Kirian's house. There was a curtain over the bottom half of the window and a shadow crossed it several times. He wondered whether it was Anfisa or Vera.

Fyodor suddenly felt empty inside and terribly depressed. There was a dull ache in his chest. He sat down on the bench outside the house, leaned against the wall and listened in surprise to the ache in his heart, feeling as though something heavy were bearing down on it. He had never had such a sensation before and it frightened him. "What's the matter? Maybe it's some kind of sickness?"

The shadow in the window next door flittered by again and became taller as Anfisa or Vera pulled off her dress. A pair of bare arms appeared above the top of the curtain, and then the light went out. "It's Anfisa," Fyodor said to himself, having recognized the arms. His blood stirred faintly, and the unpleasant ache in his heart vanished. For some reason or other he visualized Anfisa dropping off to sleep and puckering her lips like a child. She always did that in her sleep. Then he recalled the way her sharp, hot shoulders trembled under his hands, the way her thin back trembled and something inside her chest pounded loudly, making his own heart beat faster in response. In moments such as those the greedy, insatiable flame of Anfisa's eyes would scorch his soul. Even in the dark he felt he could see the smouldering flames and feel their fire.

But with Anna, with his own wife, it was always different. There was a time, long, long ago, when she was like Anfisa, when, like her, she would burst into flame and be consumed by the fire. But never had she evinced in Fyodor a similar passion. Perhaps it was because he had not trusted her. He had not trusted her from the very start, from their wedding night, when he had discovered she was not a virgin. He felt as if he had been doused with cold water, and sat down by the window, chain-smoking, recalling the

day, a year before, when Ivan had driven up to Zyatkova Balka from somewhere with her and her father's body. Finally, he had rasped,

"Who was first? Ivan? "

"No. No! No, my darling! "

"Well, who was it then? "

"I'm not to blame, Fyodor. I can't tell you. But I've never had a lover! You'll see that I've been true to you a thousand times over! I'll earn your forgiveness. I'll do anything for you. I'd give my life for single hair on your head! You don't even know how I love you. But never ask me about that. Forget it. Please, Fyodor."

That night she had stood on her knees before him, sobbing, weeping, but had not told him who the man was. And she had never told him after, either. Fyodor never forgot. He never forgave her. Anna's passion gradually cooled. She became less talkative and introverted. She aged quickly, in spirit if not in body. In bed she became evermore frigid, never repulsing him, but suffering him as her wifely duty. Fyodor became aware of this with an ever-growing feeling of disgust, until he finally had become a complete stranger to her.

He leaned farther back against the log wall and sighed. Then he recalled Kruzhilin's words about a person sometimes not being able to understand the real meaning of life and getting into trouble, wounding his soul and living on with a soul that was battered and bleeding. Now only did the meaning of these words enrage him. "Was he saying I don't understand the real meaning of life, and that I've made a mess of everything? Me, who was a partisan? Who never spared my life? Who faced death without flinching? And look at the way I've worked all these years, with never a bad word said about me." Ever since the machine and tractor station had been founded he had been the best combine driver. Kruzhilin certainly knew that. Then what right had he to speak as he had? Especially quoting that old saying: a rip in time becomes a hole. Where was the rip? And where was there now a hole?

These thoughts beat painfully against his brain, blocking out all else: Anton and Ivan, and Anna; blocking out and seemingly irradicating his own actions and attitudes

towards these people, as if he had never done anything reprehensible as far as they were concerned, or as far as anyone else was concerned, for that matter. That was why he felt so deeply and unjustly hurt by what Kruzhilin had said, by everything that had taken place that evening and by all those people Kruzhilin, Anton and Ivan. And even by his own wife.

"I'm a stranger to them all. A stranger."

* * *

Fyodor had been a quiet, awkward, timid boy. Anton, the eldest of Silanty Savelyev's three sons, an unruly, mischievous boy, had never concealed his scornful attitude towards Fyodor. He had often beaten him up and did not even regard him as his brother, actually. He never missed a chance to play a trick on him. He would draw a beard and moustache on Fyodor's face with a piece of charcoal when he was sleeping or put a prickly seed pod in his shoe or tie his pants in knots after dipping them in the river when they were bathing.

When Fyodor would come crying to their mother, Ustinya, a small, haggard woman with large work-weary hands, would grab a switch or a rolling pin and shout,

"Oh, that murderer! He'll be the death of me!" And she would run off in search of Anton.

If she found him she would beat him mercilessly. Anton never tried to escape. He would grab hold of her hands and protest,

"He's such a lump of blubber! He's dead on his feet! Why, there are flies hatching in his mouth. He's even scared of a creaking wagon wheel. He'll grow up to be a sack of sh...."

"You devils! You're driving me to my grave! I hope you all get what's coming to you!" Ustinya shouted and was very close to tears, although by then her anger would begin to cool.

"And what do you think you'll grow up to be? You should be getting another year of schooling while Pa and me are still around, but all you do is get into trouble. Look

at what you've done to your brother! You're five years older than him, but you're always after him. Wait till we send you off to live in town! That'll teach you! You won't have such a sweet life there, hiding behind your Ma and Pa. Your Uncle Mitrofan'll make you step lively, mark my words. If you don't get your empty head cracked there maybe they'll put some sense into it, you darn loafer."

One autumn day when the leaves on the birches began to fall, Anton said to Fyodor, "Want me to show you a trick, sleepy-head? I can climb down into Snake Gorge and come back out alive."

"Like hell you can!" Fyodor sneered. "There's vipers there."

"Come on, let's go." He dragged his younger brother off to Zvenigora.

The gorge Anton had spoken of was the most distant and treacherous of all the gorges of Zvenigora. In fact, it was more like a small, shallow crevice overgrown with chokecherry, hawthorn, snowball trees, wild raspberries and crab apple trees. The gorge had its source at the southern foothills of Zvenigora and extended into the heart of the stone walls, rising gradually for over a kilometer. This crevice was called Snake Gorge, because it was indeed a breeding ground for countless vipers. No one knew what it was that attracted them to the spot. Perhaps it was the berry thickets or the dampness, for there was a spring farther up the gorge which flowed down between the rocks and the six-foot-high grass to the Gromotukha, which circled Zvenigora from the south. The snakes hung suspended in coils from the branches of the trees or lay entwined, sunning themselves on the rocks on sunny days. However, these were few and far between, because a heavy, rolling fog was for ever creeping along the bottom of the gorge, licking at the trees and rocks.

In spring the gorge was a mass of flaming color. The chokecherry and wild apple trees were in blossom. Late-blooming white and purple snowdrops raised their heads in the dry spots among the rocks, and buttercups flashed in brilliant yellow patches on the moist little clearings as if someone had scattered sheets of gold about the gorge. However, pinkish-red, shamelessly bright flowers with

large, forked leaves prevailed. They did not blossom long, but flowered sumptuously, covering the rocks, grass, roots and the damp bottom of the gorge with fallen petals. It was believed that the scent drew the snakes from all over the mountain down to the gorge to eat the fallen petals, and only the fallen ones, because at this time the fatal venom, the poison that made the viper's bite so lethal, was allegedly stored in the fallen blossoms.

Eternal silence reigned over Snake Gorge. No bird ever perched there and even the wind rarely coursed through the damp rocky shute.

In autumn, when the snakes crawled into their holes and stony crevices to hibernate, the gorge became a safe place. The people of the vicinity must have realized this, but the place had such a terrible reputation that hardly anyone ever dared venture into it for an hour or so to pick hawthorn berries or the fruit of the guelder-rose. Even if they did, they did not go more than fifty feet or so into the gorge. Besides, although the berries gathered in Snake Gorge were not really thought to be poisonous, they were considered tainted all the same.

Anton was probably the first person to discover and then become convinced that the gorge was not at all dangerous in autumn. Over the course of three or four years he brought home pails full of large, sweet hawthorn berries, sacks full of flaming guelder-rose berries or small wild crab apples so sour they made your mouth pucker.

"Where'd you get them? Where'd you come on such a find?" his mother would marvel.

"Back there in the woods," Anton would reply vaguely.

"Not in Snake Gorge by any chance?" his father would ask suspiciously. "There's nothing but tainted berries there."

"Aw, Pa! Don't you think I don't know that?"

They made wonderful cider from the crab apples, and his mother used the berries for pie fillings. The family thought they were delicious.

"This doesn't taste tainted, does it? It's real good," Anton would say.

When the brothers reached Zvenigora Fyodor remained below on the bank of the Gromotukha, while Anton headed off into the gorge.

"I know, you'll just go a little way in and stand behind one on those bushes," Fyodor said.

"See that cliff over there? The one that looks like a cucumber? Well, I'm going to climb it and whistle to you, and wave."

The cliff Anton had pointed out was far back in the gorge. Some while later Fyodor heard a whistle and saw Anton on the cliff. He was astounded.

"How'd you get there? Aren't you afraid of the snakes?" he asked on the way home.

"They're afraid of me."

"Why?"

— "Because I'm not a sleepy-head."

"Quit teasing."

For several days after Fyodor seemed to be mulling something over. Finally, he said, "You know what? I won't be scared, either. I mean, going into Snake Gorge."

"You can tell that to somebody else. You'll be so scared you'll wet your pants!"

"Who, me? You louse, you! Don't you make fun of me. Come on, let's go!"

Once again they set out for Zvenigora. Anton was surprised to see his brother enter the gorge bravely. Fyodor kept on walking without once turning back. He jumped over rocks, pushed his way through the bushes and squished over the damp spots. In all this time he had only hunched his shoulders a bit. Finally, he reached the cliff from which Anton had waved to him.

"There," he said and stopped. His face was blushed and moist. "All you keep saying is I'm a sleepy-head, sleepy-head." He sniffled.

"I won't ever again. Good for you."

But Fyodor suddenly sat down on a rock and began to sob. Apparently the fear he had held in check by sheer stubbornness had been released in a gush of tears.

"Quit bawling! Hear me? This minute. I want to show you something special."

"What?" Fyodor raised his tear-stained face.

"Wait a minute. Follow me."

The top of the cliff was peaked and very steep, while the bottom was a square with ledges leading upward. Honeysuckle grew in great profusion there, seemingly sprouting from the rocks. Its branches were studded with small orange berries. Everyone said they were poisonous, and they were indeed bitter and poisonous.

In one spot a large old hawthorn bush grew among the honeysuckle. Its spines were as long as your finger. Anton darted under it, leaped onto a ledge and from there to the next one higher up.

"Come on up here, but don't prick yourself."

Fyodor followed Anton to the third or fourth ledge. There was an overhanging stone protuberance there. Now the ledges led down like steps between two narrow straight walls of rock. They suddenly parted, and Fyodor found himself in a black void. He was still standing on solid rock, but his heart skipped a beat, and he stopped. He felt that if he took another step he would go crashing down into a bottomless pit.

"Who-oo's co-ome to my-yy ho-oo-u-se? " he heard an eerie, rumbling voice say. Once again his heart lurched. He wanted to turn and flee, back to the light and fresh air, but with a great effort of will he stood his ground.

"Don't you scare me, Anton! Hear? " he said in a voice that was not his own. "Where are you? "

Anton lit a match. It flared up beside Fyodor, who now glimpsed a large cave, a dark, gloomy stone sack.

Once outside they lay on a flat lichen-covered slab, warming themselves in the mild sunshine.

"How'd you ever find the cave? You can't see it from down here."

"I was just climbing around once and found it. Isn't it big? "

"It's awful scary."

"Were you scared of the snakes when we started out for here? And don't lie."

Fyodor was some time in replying. "Uh-huh. Real scared. I wasn't scared of the ones on the ground, 'cause I've got boots on. But what if one of them dropped on top of me from a tree and got down the back of my shirt? "

"But you still came along, didn't you? "

"Sure. I didn't want you to tease me any more. That's why I didn't even care if I got bit."

Anton laughed and repeated, "Good for you, Fyodor. Don't ever be afraid of anything. And now I'll tell you a secret. There aren't any snakes here now."

"What d'you mean? Where'd they all go? "

"They start hibernating very early here, much earlier than in the woods."

"Hm. And you mean nobody knows about it back home? "

"Sure they do. But they're afraid to come here anyway, just in case. They know what this place is like."

"Hm. Wait till I bring Ivan and Kirian here. Just as soon as they get a little bigger. Boy, will their eyes pop! I'll scare them just like you scared me."

"There's one thing you've got to remember, though. Don't you dare come near this place till all the leaves on the birches are yellow. You'll die as sure as anything if you do, because the vipers will get you. Understand? "

"I'm not that dumb. I'll wait till the birches are all yellow."

"Right. Come on, I'll show you how the snakes go to sleep for the winter. They curl up into such big piles two grown men won't pick them up. Come on. But get yourself a stick first."

A week later Uncle Mitrofan, whom their mother had often spoken of, came to Mikhailovka. He embraced their parents, looked sternly at Fyodor and four-year-old Ivan, and then filled their laps with hard cakes and cheap candies wrapped in papers, just like the ones Anna, sloppy, snot-nosed daughter of the village shopkeeper Kaftanov, sucked on, arousing the envy of all the other children. She, like Ivan, was about four years old. She had once given Fyodor a candy, and he had remembered the taste of it long after. He had often crossed her path after to watch her miserably as she sucked on a candy, but Anna never noticed those glances. As Fyodor shifted his unexpected treasures, pouring the candy from one hand to the other, his thoughts were on the shopkeeper's daughter. "I don't care if she never gives me another candy. Look at how

many I've got! I'll give her a whole handful, just to show her I'm not greedy like she is."

Uncle Mitrofan stayed on in Mikhailovka for a few days. When he left, he took fourteen-year-old Anton along, leaving them several well-made stools as a gift. Fyodor was not sorry to see his elder brother go. When the large chestnut mare started off, pulling the wagon on which Anton sat, staring with frightened eyes at his parents and Fyodor, as if asking their forgiveness for all his pranks, Fyodor said, although without animosity,

"It serves you right, you louse."

"Shut up! It's bad enough as it is," his father snapped at him.

Fyodor was afraid of his father. Silanty was tall and lanky. His elbows were sharp, and his great, sparse beard was always tangled. He was perpetually sullen or cross. Silanty was rarely at home, spending months on end tilling the fields that belonged to Anna Kaftanova's father.

After the wagon disappeared beyond the last houses, his parents had gone back into the house. Ivan stood in the roadway with a finger in his nose and said, "Is Anton a louse? Is he, Fyodor?"

"What'd you think? Who tied my pants in wet knots? And all the other things he did?"

"Ah!" Ivan mulled this over for a while and then said, "Nope. He's good."

By the time his uncle and Anton left the village, Fyodor had no cakes left and only about a dozen candies. He counted them over and finally said, "All right. I'll give Anna three, and that'll be enough for her." The next day he said to himself, "Three's too much. One'll be enough." And the day after that, "Why should I give her any? Look at how much candy they've got in their shop. Her stomach's stuffed full of candy. That's why it's so big." And he popped the last of his candies into his mouth.

When Anton drove away he seemed to have disappeared into thin air. There was no word from him for the next six years, although about two years after his departure Fyodor heard Anton being spoken of. This is how it came about.

One evening his mother said to him, "It's getting dark.

Where can Ivan be? Run over to the Iniutins. He must be there. Kirian's pa just got back from the war. What with all the drinking, I don't want Ivan to get in his way."

Fyodor had heard his elders talking about a war with someone called the Japanese. It was either still being fought or had just ended. He knew that Kirian's father, Demian, had been called up for active service, but did not know he had returned, since he had spent the whole day at the river. It was a windy day early in the spring of 1906. Fyodor had gotten chilled fishing but he trudged off obediently to the far end of the village and the Iniutins' tumbledown cottage with its two murky windows.

The home-coming party was in full swing. The small cottage was crowded. Tongues of tobacco smoke licked at the low ceiling. Demian was flushed and dishevelled. He was seated at the end of the table beside a pair of crutches. Fyodor entered and stared in surprise and terror at Demian's only leg. There was a stump where the other had been. "... and that's how it was!" Demian was saying drunkenly, gesticulating as he spoke. "Those Japs are cunning as all hell. And don't you forget, they've got those god-awful 'splosives. Well, we're nobody's fools, either." He bent close to Silanty(then only did Fyodor notice his father) and, lowering his voice, added in a loud whisper, "To tell you the truth, there's an awful lot of them socialists among the soldiers."

"Socialists?" Silanty repeated. He, too, was flushed and drunk.

"Yep. And they start all kinds of propagandas, like say, don't fight too hard, boys, let the tsar lose this one war." Demian cast a wary eye around the room. "The fellows that are real dumb swallow that kind of stuff, but not me. Oh, no! See my cross? I was awarded it for bravery!" He thrust out his chest. A yellowish St. George Cross gleamed dully in the dim light of the small kerosene lamp.

Ivan and Kirian, one-legged Demian's son, sat by the threshold, dipping chunks of bread into a saucer of honey. Kirian was about the same age as Ivan. His sticky cheeks glowed, his quick eyes shone with joy and excitement.

"Yep, this cross is genuine," Kirian mumbled and

tugged Fyodor's sleeve. "If you want some honey, go take some bread. Your pa's brought the honey."

Fyodor grabbed a chunk and jabbed it into the saucer.

"What are those socialist fellows like, Demian?" Silanty asked.

"Must be like that brother of yours, Mitrofan."

"What?" Silanty's eyes grew round.

"You going to tell me you didn't know?" Demian shouted and waved his hand, knocking over his crutches. They clattered to the filthy floor. Demian was about to bend over and pick them up, but seemed to change his mind. He sat up straight, put his hands on the table and sobbed loudly and bitterly.

"What's the matter, Demian? Hey, Demian," Silanty said, touching his arm.

"Didn't you know?" Demian shouted, again bringing his head up suddenly. "About your dear brother and Anton?"

"Honest to God. We haven't had no letters."

"No letters! Well then I'll tell you. I was in that Novonikolayevsk hospital for near on to a year while they were busy cutting off my leg and sewing it up. Last year those city socialists there, they began stirring up the people. Your dear brother Mitrofan was in the thick of it, and so was Anton."

"Anton?"

"Those dumb bitches, look what they've started! We were facing those 'sposives for our country and our sovereign, with never a thought for our own lives! Where's my leg? Where is it? What'll I do without my leg? And all the while they're stirring the people up, getting them to go against the tsar."

"Don't talk about things you don't know about!" Pankrat Nazarov, the village elder, spoke up from the far end of the table. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man of about thirty with a curly beard and a strong neck that was also covered with curly hair in back.

"What do you mean, I don't know?"

"Just what I said. We don't know nothing about them socialists. We've never seen a live one. All I know is that Mitrofan's a real fine fellow. He's a carpenter."

"Fine fellow? Then what's he been slapped in jail for?" Demian roared drunkenly. "Mitrofan and Anton,

too." He turned his sweaty face towards Silanty.

"Anton?" Silanty said in a crushed voice. "Look here, what would they put a boy in jail for? He's only a kid. They couldn't do that!" Silanty saw his younger sons staring at him and frowned. "What're you doing here? Go on home, both of you!"

As soon as Fyodor reached home he blurted, "Anton's been slapped in jail, Ma!"

Ustinya had been stirring something in a pot at the stove. She gasped. "What? What for? What're you saying, stupid?"

"I don't know," Fyodor mumbled fearfully, for now, all at once, he was really frightened.

His father returned late at night and paced up and down in the little room for quite a while. He was deep in thought and kept tugging at his dishevelled beard.

"What happened? Tell me about Anton," Ustinya repeated. "Say something! Oh, Lord!"

"You want to know what happened? How the hell do I know? Demian says they've put him in jail."

As Fyodor lay in bed under the torn, old sheepskin coat for a blanket he imagined the jail to be like Kaftanov's huge warehouse. It was made of large, time-blackened logs and had an iron-bound door. The only difference between the two was that there were more padlocks hanging on the door of the jail, and a jailer armed with a whip was posted outside.

Fyodor listened intently to his parents talking in whispers, although he could not make out a word. His mother sobbed from time to time and sometimes moaned softly.

"Shush!" his father would say mildly. He would sigh and turn over, making the wooden bed creak.

At last Fyodor fell asleep. As always, he slept soundly and did not dream.

* * *

"I'm a stranger to them all. A stranger," Fyodor was thinking for the tenth time as he gazed at the dark

windows of the Iniutins' house. "A stranger to everybody except Anfisa."

Once again he thought of Anna growing old and of Anfisa, whom time seemed to have bypassed altogether. She had been just as young and firm ten and twenty years before. It had always been so convenient, having her. Even now, if he rapped lightly on the window, Anfisa would awaken instantly and follow him willingly wherever he took her. Then, later, burying her pretty face in his hairy chest, she would sleep calmly, puckering her moist lips sweetly in her sleep. It was strange and puzzling to him sometimes as he wondered whose wife she actually was: his or Kirian's. And there was something else that puzzled him, too. How had she managed to have had both of her children born of Kirian?

"Maybe she's mine?" Fyodor had asked when Vera was born. He asked the same question later, after Nikolai was born.

"Oh, no. I could never do that. Kirian's my husband, and he's the only one who can be my children's father," she had replied each time.

Indeed, the older her children became, the more they both resembled Kirian.

The edge of the sky was becoming light. Rooftops appeared from the darkness. Fyodor sat there on the bench outside his house, not knowing why, not understanding why he had sat there through the night.

"Anna'll be up soon. It's time to milk the cow," he thought indifferently and listened for some sound inside. True enough, he heard the door squeak.

A few minutes later Anna appeared carrying a pail and crossed the garden to the river. She had spotted Fyodor on the bench by the wall, but had merely glanced at him as she walked off. Fyodor guessed rather than saw that she had been crying. When she returned he said, "Come over here."

Anna set down the pail, took a few steps towards him and stopped.

"Come sit down here."

She hesitated, but finally did, staring hard at the dark windows of the Iniutins' house.

"I'll bet you think I spent the night with Anfisa."

She did not reply.

"Well, I didn't. I've been sitting here all night. I'll either never go to her again, or else marry her. That's how it's going to be from now on. Whichever way I decide."

"And how will that be? "

Fyodor sensed the mockery in her voice.

"I don't know," he said irritably.

The autumn dawn was breaking slowly and with difficulty. The sun was still far below the edge of the horizon, and its rays would probably not reach it this day, because a heavy layer of dirty-gray clouds covered the sky.

"So that's how it is, Anna," he said, rising. "I'm going back to work now."

He said no more and headed out the gate. It squeaked pitifully and the sound slashed across Anna's heart. Her lips twitched. She felt the heavy tears course down her cheeks, stinging them.

"Oh, a woman's lot is a bitter one," she heard Maria Firsova, their lodger, say.

She came over and sat down beside Anna, who could contain her tears no longer and fell sobbing upon the woman's shoulder. Her shawl slipped off her head.

"Now, now, there," Maria Firsova said, stroking Anna's warm hair.

"You're just tormenting yourself. I heard you crying all night. Is it really that bad? "

"You can't imagine! " Anna sobbed. "Oh, why was I ever born? Only to suffer."

"The way I see it, if there's no suffering, there can't be any happiness. We wouldn't know the meaning of it."

"But where is it? Not even happiness, but just a little joy? What's it like? "

"You're not telling the truth, my girl. There's been happiness in your life. Every person has some happiness, if only just a little. It can't be otherwise."

Anna sat up straight, fixed her shawl and sighed. "I don't know. Maybe there was, but there was so little of it. And so long ago. So little and so long ago that it might not ever have been me. It's all forgotten."

"No it isn't, if it still hurts. It's not forgotten."

The night had passed. It had been a dead, black night. But an hour before it had seemed that this night would never end, that it would lay thus upon the earth as eternal blackness, crushing out all sounds, all life by the density of the gloom. But then dawn began to break. Although it was still faint and dull, lights started flickering on in one house after another, and chimneys began to smoke.

The light suddenly went on in the house next door. Once again, as several hours before, a shadow crossed the window. It was a woman's shape.

"Does your husband have another woman?" Maria Firsova asked point-blank. Anna started. "I'm not blind, you know."

"He's had her all his life. There she is," Anna said, nodding in the direction of the shadow moving back and forth behind the curtain.

"Is she that much better than you? "

"I don't know. Why are you torturing me? " Anna cried, and her voice was very near to hate.

"But you do know! I'm sure you've thought about it," Maria Firsova continued, as if she had not heard Anna's words or understood the state she was in. "We all think about such things. I still remember the first man I fell in love with when I was just a girl. I lost my head completely and never did realize just when it was that he made a woman of me. And then he ditched me and took up with another girl. God, the tears I wept! I used to stand naked in front of my mirror for hours, comparing myself to that girl. I'd spy on her when she was bathing and then look at myself. I had better legs and firmer breasts and a prettier face. And it would hurt so, I'd burst out crying again. That's what it was like."

Strangely, the longer she spoke, the more the sound of her voice soothed Anna. Perhaps it was her utter frankness that disarmed her.

"I don't know," Anna said and sighed. "There was a time when I was better than Anfisa. Prettier, at any rate. I'm still stronger than she is, but now.... I've got all shrivelled up. It's his doing."

"That means he's just a no-good, insignificant little man," Maria Firsova replied thoughtfully.

"How would you know?" Anna retorted, stung by such an evaluation of Fyodor.

"I know he's no good," Maria Firsovna repeated. Then she added, "There are all kinds of people. I got married soon after. I didn't love my husband. I just married him to cover my sin. Well, we had our wedding, and then we went to bed. And I said to myself that if I heard a single word of reproach from him, I'd jump out of the window in my nightgown and run away, and if he ran after me, I'd bite and scratch. I knew he'd run after me, because he loved me. Well, anyway, he was lying there, staring up at the ceiling. Just lying there staring up at the ceiling. I was afraid to breathe. I was prepared for anything, but not that. It was worse than torture. Then he sighed and said, 'I'm sorry it's like this, Maria. But whatever it was, was before I knew you, and it's not for me to judge you. But if anything happens from now on, I'll be the one to judge you.' And that was all. He never said another word about it. And we've been married for fifteen years."

"What about you?" Anna asked cautiously.

"What about me? I'm very happy. I've never been unfaithful to Gerasim, not even in my mind. And I never will. You know why? You think it's because I still remember the way he sighed? Sure, I do. But that's not the main reason. He's a good man. I'd have gladly died then, rather than have to look him in the eye."

"You mean you got to love him?"

"Yes. Not right away, though. He's not much to look at, and he's shorter than me, but I really fell in love with him." She adjusted her skirt and sighed. "Where is he now? He's been fighting since the very first day of the war. He was called up right away, and then we were evacuated here, so he doesn't even know where we are. If he's still alive I know we'll find each other. But if he isn't, I don't know what'll become of me. I'll just pine away, I guess."

She spoke softly, and at times her voice trembled. There was such sincerity and sadness in it that Anna knew in her heart that she actually would pine away if her husband did not return.

"I know you're a good woman, Maria."

Maria Firsovna looked at her keenly, and for the first time Anna noticed how friendly and kind her eyes were. The mysterious light coming from deep within them seemed to beckon to her. She understood then why Gerasim, who was not much to look at, had fallen in love with her and had loved her all these years.

"Don't be silly. I'm a very ordinary woman. But Gerasim's a wonderful man. As far as what I told you about, it's something I never even think about."

Dawn had broken. People were passing now, looking over the fence in wonder at the two women sitting on the bench by the wall. Anna stared off into space.

"You were lucky in one way, Maria. You saw that that first fellow was no good right from the start. You were young then, and you had no children. But what about me? And anyway, why'd you tell me all this? Just to make me feel bad?" Anna shouted the last few words, and her face became mean and ugly.

"Now, now. Don't be like that. What's the use of it? I just told you about myself, and you forgive me. I don't know why I did. But what's the sense in the kind of life you're leading? There, you've begun to cry again. Women have so many tears to shed! Wipe your eyes."

Anna wiped her wet cheeks obediently. "What'll I do? Divorce him?"

"Nobody can give you any advice about something like this. You're the only one who can decide. I heard Semyon tossing all night. He saw the state you were in when you came back from visiting so soon, and he couldn't fall asleep. Andrei and Dima are still too little to understand what's going on, but Semyon's grown-up and he knows. Think of what all this is doing to the children, growing up in a family where there's no love. But then again, how'll they make out if you get divorced? You have to think it over a hundred times before you decide, to see which way'll be better for the children. A woman always thinks of her children first. That's how we're made."

"And I couldn't be careless about myself now, anyway."

"Don't be in a rush. You're not that old yet. You might still find a man you love. You might even have another child."

Anna lifted her eyes slowly and gazed at Maria Firsova, as if to say, "I don't understand you, Maria. What're you advising me to do?" What she actually said, though, was, "Do you really think so?"

"Life is full of surprises. Anything can happen. Maybe you'll find your happiness. But maybe you won't."

"I know I won't."

"Don't say things like that. There are lots of good men in this world."

"Maybe there are, but they're not looking for me. And ... I guess I don't have a right to be happy."

"Why not?"

"My whole life is a mess. My father was a kulak. And my brother is a thief. A real bandit. He's spent most of his life in jails. He showed up here a while ago. You must've heard the talk about Makar Kaftanov, the man who was arrested?"

Maria Firsova raised her head. The same mysterious light flickered in her tired eyes and began to glow evenly.

"My maiden name was Kaftanova. But I was a partisan during the Civil War. I fought together with Fyodor. And then ... then...." Once again tears welled up in Anna's red-rimmed eyes. She leaned against Maria Firsova's shoulder, and, sensing that Maria understood her, feeling immensely grateful to her, she began speaking through her sobs.

"If you only knew how awful it is to hear you talk about your husband! Maybe I had a man who loved me like that, too. And I did, but he passed me by. I shoved him away myself. He forgave me for what happened when I was still a girl. Fyodor didn't make a woman of me. It was somebody else. I've never.... I could never tell anyone about him. Not a single living soul. Oh, Lord! Why didn't I hang myself then? I'd never have suffered like this."

"Don't go on like this, Anna. Try to get a hold of yourself. People are looking at us. Come, let's go inside," Maria Firsova said, rising. "If it's something you can't talk about, don't. There are some things a person has to carry to his grave. Sometimes there are such things. Come on, get up."

Anna rose with difficulty and wiped her eyes with a corner of her shawl.

"I'm sorry I went to pieces," she said, and her voice was unexpectedly calm. "Fyodor isn't the only reason my life is so hard. It's everything put together. It's because my father was a bandit, and because my brother is, too."

She picked up the pail of water and went inside, stopping in the doorway to say, "I can tell you who forgave me for everything. The one who's like your husband. It's Fyodor's brother, Ivan."

"Ivan? You mean the one who's just come back from prison?"

"Yes. But don't you think he's like my brother Makar. He isn't. He's like your husband. It's taken me half my life to understand it. Maybe that's why his life's been so awful."

* * *

Fyodor did not reach the farm's summer field camp until nearly noon, since there were no trucks going his way. He was hungry, and therefore still more irritable than usual as he headed towards his combine, marooned in the middle of the desolate field, beside the black hulk of Kirian Iniutin's tractor. He kicked open the door of the mobile shed.

"Everybody snoring away here?" he bellowed and kicked away a pail that had got underfoot. "Get up, all of you! Right now! Where are you, Kirian? And where's something for me to eat?"

Now, at last, he saw that the bunk beds were all empty.

"What's going on here? Hey! Where's everybody?"

Tonya, the cook, a young girl far too fat for her age, appeared from behind a curtain, looking sleepy-eyed and dishevelled. She was known as Battleaxe Tonya, because although she was indifferent to the salty jokes of the men and paid no attention to their insinuations, she would wield her rolling-pin at anyone who stuck his head behind the curtain into her quarters, either to tease or in earnest.

"Quit hollering," she said. "There's some bread and milk, and some fatback. But there's nothing hot, because I

didn't cook anything. There's nobody to cook for."

"What do you mean? Where's Kirian? Is he out by the tractor?"

"He's gone to Shantara. Home, I guess. He left last night, right after you did," Tonya said lazily.

"What're you talking about? How could he have gone home?"

"He just said to hell with everything and left."

"What?"

"You heard me. He said, 'I don't want to work alongside of Fyodor for even one more minute.' He cursed some and left. I don't know how your tongues don't shrivel from all the cursing you do." She yawned and disappeared behind the curtain. Settling down on the creaking trestle bed, she continued, "And he said to tell you to get yourself another tractor driver. And then the other workers left. They said they were going to the bathhouse to wash off the dirt, leaving me all alone here with the wolves. Those creatures seemed like they knew I was all alone here last night and came right up to the door. You go tell Nazarov that if the men don't come back by this evening, I'm going home, too. I'm not going to spend another night here all by myself."

Forgetting his hunger and leaving, Fyodor stamped out of the shed while Tonya was still speaking and went off swiftly to Mikhailovka. He spotted the farm chairman near the granary and lit into him. "What the hell's going on here? You're the chairman! Why can't you keep things in hand? Who does Kirian think he is, anyway?"

"How do I know who Kirian thinks he is?" Nazarov replied in an undertone, curbing Fyodor's rage. "What're you shouting at me for? You and Kirian are on the staff of the machine and tractor station, so you can take all your complaints there."

It struck Fyodor that Nazarov really did not have anything to do with it, and he cooled off a bit.

Several men and women holding long scythes and rakes were standing around the granaries. A gig drove up. The old warehouse manager carried out half a sack of flour and two large loaves of freshly-baked white bread which he loaded into it.

"Go on," Nazarov said. "When you pass the potato field, take as much as you need, but don't forget to cover the pile again. Tonya has enough meat for today. I'll send some more over tomorrow."

"Are they going to cut the last strip of wheat?" Fyodor inquired at last.

"You don't expect me to wait till you and Kirian get through playing your games, do you? You want the snow to cover the wheat?"

"I had your permission to leave. And it was only for a night."

"Well, Kirian didn't. And he's gone for the day. Have a look at the sky. If that doesn't look like snow, what does?"

Fyodor spat and ran off to the farm office. He was panting hard as he cranked the telephone furiously. "Hello! Is this the station? I want the machine and tractor station! Get me the manager, and hurry."

As ill luck would have it, neither the director nor the chief engineer were in, and nobody knew where Kirian was. All they could say was that he hadn't shown up at the office.

Fyodor dashed out. He spun around by the porch in a helpless rage. If, by some miracle, Kirian had suddenly appeared he would have soon been pounded black-and-blue.

Fyodor cursed and ran across the village to the nearest threshing floor. There he was told that several wagons carrying grain had left for the granary about an hour before, and he was advised to go to the next shed, from where the grain was to be taken to Shantara. However, he felt that would only be losing time. He groaned and dashed off to the deserted high road and the district center, walking rapidly for nearly an hour. A passing wagon gave him a lift as he was nearing Zvenigora.

Fyodor reached Shantara when the sun, which had unexpectedly appeared, was dipping beyond the horizon. Once again he was out of luck. The silent old wagon-driver turned in at the first house and stopped. The machine and tractor station was at the opposite end of the large village.

Meanwhile, the sun had set, and the streets were

plunged in the blue of twilight.

"Where'll I go? To the machine station, the Party Committee or the Executive Committee?" Fyodor was thinking feverishly as he walked down the street. "They've probably all gone home by now. And, anyway, what can they do? No, I've got to see Kirian first and ask him what the hell it's all about. He's been all puffed up like a gobbler these past weeks. Maybe he was hatching a plan. He sure hatched a good one."

The first lights were going on as Fyodor passed his own house and turned in at Kirian's gate. He dashed up the porch steps, crossed the dark pantry and tore open the door.

Kirian Iniutin was sitting at the empty table. He had on his good Sunday pants and an undershirt, and was barefoot. He was fingering a wooden spoon, tracing something on the painted table top. Anfisa stood by the brick oven, her arms crossed on her chest. Her beautiful dark eyes were thoughtful. There was an unusual expression on her face: it was grave, even anxious. They had apparently been discussing something of great importance to them both and would have probably go on speaking if Fyodor had not interrupted them.

He took the scene in at a glance, grasping the situation and noting that Anfisa was frightened by his arrival. She backed away towards the wall and looked quickly from left to right, as if trying to decide where to run, to escape. But there was no escape. Her brows shot up, her cheeks turned pale. Kirian, however, merely stopped moving the spoon across the table top.

"So," Fyodor said, exhaling loudly as he stood in the doorway.

Iniutin slammed down his spoon. "You're early, Fyodor. I haven't gone to bed yet."

"Kirian!" Anfisa cried plaintively and fell to her knees, burying her head in her husband's lap. If she was weeping, she was doing so silently, but apparently she was, for her back and shoulders heaved. Her long hair came unwound to cover Kirian's bare feet. He put his hand on his wife's shoulder and patted it lightly.

"Don't. Get up. Come, now."

Anfisa's behavior, Kirian's actions and words, and the tenderness in his voice was so unusual it actually frightened Fyodor.

Anfisa rose and began winding her hair into a bun, standing with her back to the two men.

"What do you think you're doing?" Fyodor began in a hoarse voice. "Why'd you leave the field? What if it snows tomorrow? Don't you know there's a war on? Go on, tell me."

"It'll take too long to tell you what I want to say to you," Kirian spoke slowly. "And anyway, I don't think I could. I wouldn't find the right words. So the only thing I can say is: get out! "

"If you don't want to work with me, you don't have to. Go find another combine driver. Maybe you'll make more money working with somebody else. But you could've waited a couple of more days. Then you could've found yourself a partner for next summer. And don't think I won't make you pay for walking out on the job! "

"Oh, you will? You and who else? "

"I see. I should've guessed. What'd you do, volunteer again? What about your deferment? Did you get them sign you up? "

"They wanted to, but I was missing a paper, so I'll have to wait."

Fyodor smiled scornfully. "You'd make a fine soldier, I don't think. Well, while they're hunting around for your missing paper, you and me have got to finish off that last strip. I'll knock at dawn, and see that you're ready. We've got to be at the field in the morning. I'm turning in. I haven't slept since yesterday."

"A lot of things can happen till morning," Kirian replied mysteriously and, smiling mockingly, he added, "Go ahead and knock if you want to. I said you're early, but it'll be just right at dawn. Anfisa'll open the door for you."

Then, seeing that she had spun around and was about to say something, he slapped his hand on the table and added, "That's enough! "

Fyodor could not understand what Kirian meant.

At that very moment Vera burst into the house and

stumbled against Fyodor.

"He's not at the station. We've looked everywhere. He must've hopped a train." She spoke rapidly as she untied her knotted shawl. Then she pressed her hands against her rosy cheeks.

"What's all the commotion about?" Fyodor asked, prompted by curiosity alone as he put his hand on the latch. "Who's gone where?"

"Don't you know?" Vera exclaimed in astonishment. "Andrei's run off to war!"

"Who?" He took an involuntary step towards her. "What're you talking about? What do you mean?" He dashed out without waiting for a reply.

* * *

For a while there was silence in the Iniutin's house. The oven door rattled as Anfisa opened it and then she began preparing supper. They ate in silence.

"Where's Nikolai?" Kirian asked his daughter.

"He's still at the station, looking. Dima and Semyon are, too. They think he may be hiding someplace. There are mountains of factory equipment piled up all over."

A short while later Kirian addressed her again. "Are you really set on marrying Aleinikov?"

Vera spilled the soup in her spoon, but this was the only indication of her state of mind. "We'll see," she uttered staring into her plate.

Anfisa stared at her but said nothing.

"What about Semyon? Did you jilt him?"

"You're funny. I said we'll see."

"Then there's nothing definite between you and Yakov?"

"How could there be? All he does is comes to the office sometimes and stares at me."

"You're lying. Your mother said he's been seeing you home from work."

"No, he hasn't. He only did twice. He walks along, right up to the porch, but he never says anything. Then he mumbles goodnight and hurries off."

"Does Semyon know? "

"Nikolai snitched on him."

"What'd he say? "

"Nothing. And, anyway, I haven't seen him alone to talk to him for a long time. He's always busy delivering supplies to the plant."

"I see." Kirian put down his spoon and pushed his plate away. "I don't know what you've grown up to be, Vera. Either a first-rate bitch, or maybe even better'n that."

"You've said that so many times it's boring. I haven't grown up to be anything yet."

She left the table, threw her coat over her shoulders and went out.

After supper Anfisa cleared the table. Kirian sat on the doorstep, smoking. Then he rose, pulled on his boots, his shirt, the coat of his suit and old jacket. He seemed to be dressing for work. All except his pants, which were his Sunday best.

"Give me my knapsack," he said.

Anfisa pulled a small knapsack from under the bed, but instead of handing it to him she dropped it and fell against her husband, crying, "Kirian! What're you doing? Everything'll be different from now on. You'll see."

"I don't believe you."

"It will, it will. Kirian! " She threw back her tear-stained face and gazed at him beseechingly.

"It's not that. I can't go on like this any more. There's something empty inside of me. I don't know what's missing, but I'm going to try and find out. You can do whatever you want to. The kids are grown up. If I live through the war, I'll come back to see how things are. How you are, and things in general. Well, we'll see then. I've forgiven you for everything."

"Just think what you're doing! You're running away from home to where all the fighting is. Just like a kid. Just like Andrei! He's still a baby. He has no brains. We'll be the laughing-stock of the whole village! And you will, too. Whoever heard of a man your age running off to war? " She spoke feverishly.

"Let them laugh. I don't mind."

"But you know it's wartime, and you can't buy a train ticket anywhere. They'll put you off at the first stop."

"We'll see. I won't get on here. I'll go as far as the crossing and hop a freight. Or anything else that comes along. Andrei's made it harder for me, because they'll be checking every train out of here now. Anyway, we'll see."

"Kirian! Please! They'll call you up anyway."

"Stop it, I said." He spoke irritably, moving her off. "I don't want you to be faithful to me, or anything else now, except one thing. I don't want you to say a word—today, tomorrow, in a week from now, or ever as to where I've gone. That's the only thing I'm asking you to do. And so's nobody'll think I'm a draft dodger, I'll write to you from the front, if I make it. So that nobody'll make any trouble for you here. That's all I wanted to say."

Kirian picked up his knapsack and turned to the door. Anfisa was now wailing loudly and clutching at him wildly. He tried to shove her away, to tear her hands off his shoulders, but could not. Thus, practically dragging her along, he went through the door into the pantry and there, at last, he managed to break free. He darted out onto the porch, slammed the door and latched it.

"Kiria-ann!" she screamed, rattling the locked door.

"When Vera gets back she'll open the door, or else Nikolai will," Kirian said to himself as he went down the porch steps.

* * *

Fyodor seemed to reach his house in a leap and a bound. He threw open the door. "Well?"

Anna was wearing a pair of heavy boots and a dirty sweater. She dashed about the room as if she were insane. Ganka followed her. She was holding a mug and saying, "Auntie Anna! Auntie Anna! Have a drink of water. Lie down. He'll show up. Where can he go? Auntie Anna...." Anna stopped to glance at her husband vacantly. Then she slowly raised her hands to her face and began sinking to the floor. She would have fallen if Fyodor had not caught her. He sat her down on the bed.

"Here, have a drink, Auntie Anna," Ganka said again, offering her the mug.

This time Anna took it and drank.

"How'd it happened?" Fyodor asked.

No one really knew. That morning, as always, Andrei had picked up his battered school satchel and had gone off to school. Anna had recently gone to work at the plant site. She came home for lunch at one o'clock, but neither Andrei nor Dima were back yet. Dima was in the seventh grade and was sometimes late, but Andrei should have been home. "What's keeping him?" Anna wondered as she began setting the table for lunch, expecting the boys to show up at any moment. She waited a little while longer and then went outside to see if they weren't coming. Indeed, someone was running towards her, and it looked like Dima. "Where is that rascal Andrei?" she said to herself.

Then she noticed a book stuck under the porch. She bent to pull it out. It was Andrei's arithmetic book. Anna felt around on the ground under the porch and pulled out a few more of his school books. A vague, uneasy premonition gripped her heart. At last she heard Dima shouting,

"Mama! Mama! Andrei... here," he panted, handing her a slip of paper.

"What's the matter?"

Andrei had scrawled a message on the paper:

"Dima, tell Nikolai he's a dope. Why go to the draft board? He can do like I'm doing. Tell Ma I've gone to the front so she won't worry about me. But wait three days. I hope you won't tell her right away. Promise? Your brother Andrei."

"What is it? I don't understand," Anna mumbled.

"Can't you see? That stupid fool's gone and run away. He was afraid he couldn't trust me. He thought I'd tell you the minute I found out, so he stuck this in my physics book. That was our last class today. He knew what he was doing. I told the teacher, and she told me to run home and tell you."

Now, at last, the meaning of Andrei's note struck her full force. "That little fool! He'll starve to death. What'll we do, Dima? We've got to get to the station. Maybe he's

still there. What about Semyon? Does he know? ”

“I don’t think so. How could he? ”

“Run straight to the station. You’re sure to find Semyon there. Tell him. I’m going to the militia. Wait! Wait! ” she shouted as Dima turned to race off. “You haven’t eaten. Go take some bread at least.”

Dima ran into the house, snatched a few chunks of bread from the table and raced off towards the station.

Before Anna had a chance to say a word, the man on duty at the militia station said, “We know. A teacher phoned in from school. We’ve started searching for him. The railroad militia has been notified. Don’t worry, we’ll find him. He’s not a needle in haystack.”

Leaving the militia station, Anna ran to the station.

All the rest of that day Anna, Semyon, Dima, Nikolai and Vera Iniutin, who had joined the search, and long-legged Ganka looked in every nook and cranny, checked every freight leaving the station, made their way through stacks of bricks and lumber, but all in vain. Andrei was gone.

“Oh! I’ll never see him again! ” Anna whispered distractedly. “He’ll get run over by a train, or something’ll fall on him and crush him.”

“You go on home, Mama,” Semyon said when it began getting dark. “Nothing’ll happen to him. We’ll find him. Ganka and Vera, you take her home.”

However, she would not leave the station until it was pitch dark.

“You and Dima keep on looking. Maybe he’s hiding someplace,” she said to Semyon.

“Sure we will.”

This was what Fyodor learned from Anna and Ganka’s jumbled story. He had not taken off his jacket, but stood there, listening to them. Anna sat on the bed, speaking through her tears.

“Stop crying,” he said, ripping off his jacket. “Give me something to eat. I haven’t had a bite since yesterday. They’ll find him if they’re looking. He isn’t a needle in a haystack. I’ll go over to the militia and see what they’re doing to find him.”

As he waited for something to eat he set his elbows on

the table and dropped his pounding head onto his hands.

After supper Fyodor went to the militia. When he returned he began undressing in silence. He pulled off his boots, crossed the kitchen barefoot to where Anna now slept and lay down with his face to the wall.

"Well? What'd they say? "

"Nothing yet. Go to bed." A moment later he turned over on his back and said, "Anikei Yelizarov said Makar's going to be tried for hijacking the shop. He's a real sharp operator. Nobody else could've done it but him and somebody named Lyonya Gvozdev. I don't recall that name. Vitya Kashkarov helped them. Makar even dragged the kid into it. This is wartime, and your brother'll get what's coming to him now." He yawned. A moment later he was breathing deeply and evenly.

Anna stared at her husband hatefully. It seemed to her that his mouth was still stretched open in a yawn, and that a huge black pit took up half of his face.

* * *

On a hot June day in the summer of 1910, Silanty Savelyev came home from Kaftanov's farmstead in the forest, tossed his whip into the corner, sat down at the table and buried his head in his hands.

"Blessed Mary, preserve us," Ustinya said, crossing herself.

"Where's Fyodor? "

"He's watering the garden. What's the matter? "

"Nothing, except that our life isn't worth a damn! Mikhail Lukich says Fyodor's to be his watchman at the farmstead now."

"Dear Lord! " Ustinya sank onto the bench. "It'll ruin the boy. Why, he's only fifteen."

"Well, there's only two things we can choose from. Either it'll ruin him, or we starve to death."

The last years had brought the Savelyevs closer and closer to the brink of poverty. It all began with Demian Iniutin's return. He was on a drinking spree for several days after he got back. Then he made himself a peg leg.

"Now I have a leg again," he said to Silanty when the latter dropped in to see him one evening. "I've made it out of an asp. It's not too heavy. Do you know of any wood that's lighter? "

"No. I've never had to worry about that."

"All your worries are under lock and key in jail," Demian said, and his lips, peeling from his long days of drinking, turned up in a smile.

"For God's sake! What's the matter with you? It all happened because he's such a young fool."

Sometimes people undergo strange transformations. Before the war Demian was a downtrodden, timid man, a pauper like Silanty. In their youth they had gone dating girls together and had toiled side by side, tilling Kaftanov's fields. But Demian had returned from the battlefields with a St. George Cross. He was a changed man. From the very outset, from his very first days back home, he behaved as if he were now a head taller than Silanty and all the other men of the village.

However, neither Silanty nor anyone else knew as yet or could guess the latent forces and desires which this St. George Cross had brought to life, or the plans this man had been making as he lay on his hard hospital cot.

"Lord, make it so I don't lose my leg! " he had groaned, writhing from pain. "I've got a St. George Cross now, the only man who has one in the whole village. I can't lose my leg! "

Nevertheless, his leg was amputated below the knee. Tears of rage and bitterness choked him. Then, having wept his fill and seething with rage at the whole wide world, he would repeat to himself again and again: "Just you wait. You wait. I'll show you."

Actually, he did not know at the time what he meant by this, but an inner voice told him that he would never again let anyone put him down, or let fate strike another blow at him.

The next day, having adjusted his peg leg, Demian polished his cross with a piece of flannel, put on a new shirt and presented himself to Kaftanov.

"Ah, our warrior," Kaftanov drawled. His face was red and perspiring. He was blowing on a saucer of hot tea. "Sit

down and have some tea with us. Do us the honor."

Demian tossed his old cap into a corner, looked at the icons and crossed himself. Kaftanov's wife, a haggard sallow-faced woman with thinning hair, poured him some tea. "What do you know? She's as skinny as ever," Demian was thinking as he sized her up. "Maybe she's sickening."

He had one cup of tea, and then pushed the cup and saucer away, signifying that he had not come for this, but on important business.

Kaftanov was a large, stout man with full cheeks. He had a prominent nose covered with a tracery of tiny red veins, eyes that were forever bloodshot and a big, bushy beard touched with grey.

He wiped his wet lips on a towel and said mockingly, "What is it, soldier? Are you here about a job?"

"That's it, Mikhail Lukich. I've come about employment."

"What sort of a farm hand'll you make now that you've only got one leg?" Kaftanov inquired as he scratched his hairy chest.

"That's right, Mikhail Lukich. I'm not much good for heavy work now, but I can serve you."

Kaftanov's wife crossed herself and slipped out of the room as softly as a mouse.

"All right, Demian, since you've been awarded a cross, I'll give you an easy job. I'll set you up as the caretaker at my retreat in Ognev Springs. If you recall, I'm a man who likes a good time. I like to bring my women out there."

"Oh yes, of course. You're a wild man, you are, Mikhail Lukich. It's a known fact."

"Well, then. You'll live there, keep the place tidy and make home-brew, so's whenever I get an itch and feel like coming out, everything'll be in order. I keep a pair of horses there, just in case, and you'll look after them. From now on you're going to be my caretaker."

Kaftanov guffawed loudly. He laughed so hard tears sprang to his bloodshot eyes. When he finally calmed down he added, "You're a useful fellow for the job. When I'm stone drunk I don't think my chicks'll look at you."

However, Demian retained his serious mien. He even

regarded Kaftanov disapprovingly, "Cod will forgive you for treating the bearer of a St. George Cross like this, Mikhail Lukich. As far as me being a useful man to you goes, you don't even know how useful yet."

There was something out of the ordinary in what his former field hand was saying and in the way he was saying it. Kaftanov squinted and then stared hard at Iniutin.

"You tell me, then."

"What you want to do is make me the overseer of all your holdings. That's your best bet."

This was so unexpected Kaftanov gasped.

"I don't mean your shop, of course," Demian added. "That's something only you can do."

"What're you talking about, stupid? What kind of an overseer do you mean?"

"Like a head clerk, or an assistant. Like all the rich noble men have."

"Do you have the brains for it?"

"Don't worry. I won't let you down."

Kaftanov cleared his throat. He walked around Demian, examining him as if he were some strange creature. "So. And what about stealing from me? Hm?"

"To tell you the truth, there's bound to be a bit of that," Demian replied, looking Kaftanov straight in the eye. "Only a fool doesn't like his bread buttered, and I'm no fool. But you look at it this way: I'll steal a copper's worth and bring in ten rubles profit."

Kaftanov gazed at Demian in astonishment. "You've come back a changed man, you know, but don't forget my son Zinovy is seventeen now. I want to make him my, uh, chief manager."

"He's a greenhorn, Mikhail Lukich, like they say. Let him go onto the shop for the time being. There's more'n enough for him to do there. And I'll watch over all the rest. Meanwhile, you'll be holding the reins and waving your whip. And that's only like it should be."

Demian suddenly fell to his knees and grasped Kaftanov's hand. "I'll serve you faithfully, Mikhail Lukich. I swear by my cross. I'll be more faithful to you than a dog. You'll see. You'll soon see what a profit I'll bring in. I swear you will! And it won't be long, either, if you put

me in charge. Nothing'll slip through my fingers. And if you don't take a liking to me, or if there's any loss on account of me, you go right ahead and kick me out. Who's to stop you? Mikhail Lukich...."

The very next day Iniutin appeared in Kaftanov's stables, giving out orders as to which horses were to be harnessed to the ploughs and which were to be sent to town for merchandise for the shop. A week later he showed up in the fields, hobbling along the full length of the long furrows, his peg leg sinking deep into the loose earth. Whenever it would not sink deep enough, he would step and shout,

"Hey! Who ploughed this row?" and when some weatherbeaten peasant approached he'd say, avoiding the latter's eyes, "Now, then. You're to plough this over again tonight. We'll deduct the cost of the wear and tear on the master's plough and the extra load on the horses in the fall, right and proper."

He spoke softly and calmly, and was not angry, so that no one really took him seriously.

In June, when the haying began, Demian said to many a local man, speaking in the same measured voice, "I'd like to hire you, because I know you have a house full of hungry kids to feed, but I remember the way you ploughed last spring. You tried to cheat, didn't you? You didn't really plough deep, did you? It means somebody's always got to keep an eye on you. And I can't be running back and forth all the time. I've only got the one leg. So you go look for work some other place. Maybe they'll take you on in the village across the river. You'll get paid for ploughing in the fall. You're not a bad worker, but you like to sleep too much. Remember, you practically slept till noon last Easter? And the ground kept drying while you were sleeping. I don't really know what to do about you. All right, I'll give you a last chance."

Somehow, without unnecessary noise or shouting, Demian established his own hiring rules. The men whom he had refused to hire would spit in disgust and go off to seek their fortune in other villages. Those who worked for Kaftanov still did not sense any real danger. They paid no attention to Demian's threats and mutterings, thinking

he'd grumble for a while and then forget all about it.

However, they were thunderstruck when the time for reckoning came in the fall, for each man received about half of what he had usually been paid in former years. There was a great commotion and shouting as the peasants demanded to see Kaftanov.

"Shut up, everybody!" Kaftanov shouted. "Demian hired you. So you settle all your accounts with him."

"That's it. You've had it, men," Demian Iniutin said, smiling smugly into the stringy red beard he had grown over the summer. "Who are the big troublemakers here? I don't want to forget them."

At the end of December Demian came to see Kaftanov. He pulled some crumpled scraps of paper from his pocket and said, "Now then, Mikhail Lukich, I've done some figuring here. We've harvested about ten thousand poods more wheat, oats, barley and buckwheat than you did last year on the same fields. We've put away a right fine store of hay. If you want to, you can buy another twenty or thirty cows now. We've churned more butter and got more honey than before, too. You can figure it all out in rubles. The way I see it, I've brought in an extra profit of about twenty thousand rubles. Now you go ahead and decide whether you've made a mistake about taking me on. If you didn't, maybe I'm due for a raise."

"You sure are a tight-fisted son-of-a-gun, Demian. I never expected it. You just see the men don't bash your head in with that peg leg of yours."

For the next year and-a-half Demian Iniutin lived in the same tumbledown cottage he had lived in before the war, but in the fall of 1907 he hired a gang of itinerant carpenters, and in a month's time they built him a neat little three-room house.

"That's not the kind of house you should've built yourself," Pankrat Nazarov, the village elder, said one day, smiling slyly at him.

"We've no need for a bigger house. There's only me, the wife and Kirian. What's the use wasting money on firewood to heat a bigger place? It's a long winter."

"Now's a good time to increase the family."

"It's too late for that. The wife's no spring chicken any

more. That's something you young studs can worry about."

"I wouldn't say so. You plough the ground with that peg leg as good as any stallion's hoof."

"What?" Demian's stringy beard shook as he tried to understand the meaning of Nazarov's words.

During that first summer Iniutin was not too hard on Silanty Savelyev. Perhaps this was because there was no occasion to find fault with him. Silanty had always been a hard worker. Demian had often checked the depth of his furrows. He had hobbled around the haystacks Silanty had put up and had often appeared unexpectedly at the threshing shed, thrusting his hand and arm up to the shoulder into a pile of grain Silanty had threshed, pulling out a handful of rye to see if there were weed seeds mixed in and poking around with his peg leg in the piles of chaff to see whether there was any grain left there, stamping off in a huff. Silanty worked still more conscientiously, sensing that he would have to pay dearly for the slightest error. He was not mistaken.

While bringing the hay in from one of the distant meadows that winter he hurried to return before darkness had fallen and did not notice an icy patch on the road. The load tipped and fell over. One of the shafts snapped, sending the horse into the snow.

By the time he unharnessed it, chopped down a young tree and adjusted the makeshift shaft, it was pitch dark. Then he began loading the hay back on the sleigh. Suddenly, a strong wind blew up, carrying clumps of hay off into the night. He worked frantically but the wind tore both the pitchfork and the hay out of his hands. As ill luck would have it, it began to snow. The wind was stronger now. Everything became a howling, swirling mass. In another few minutes the wild gusts had blown away the last of the hay, carrying it off into the snowdrifts and the night.

There was nothing he could do. Silanty, chilled to the bone, tossed the rope and pitchfork into the empty sleigh and drove back to the village, where he told Demian about the accident.

Demian cursed foully. "You're all good at stirring up trouble. Go on."

When Silanty showed up at Kaftanov's stable the next morning Demian raised his round eyes that were beginning to sink in folds of fat.

"Go on. Go on. You heard what I said yesterday."

"You can't be serious. It was an accident. Have a heart."

"If I do, Mikhail Lukich won't have a stitch left to cover his nakedness."

"He's so long way off from that. As far away as we are from God."

"Don't you talk like that around here! Get out, I said! "

There had never been any really happy days in all of Silanty's life, but from then on it became an unending procession of black days. True, from time to time Demian would hire him or Fyodor, when he got bigger, for some small job, but no matter how hard they worked Demian always found fault with what they did. He was forever admonishing them, making them do the work over, paying them half of what they'd earned.

"What does he have against us?" Fyodor would mutter time and again and his nostrils would flare. "I'll get even with him. I'll run him through with a pitchfork."

"What're you talking about, you fool!" Silanty would say, turning green under the gills, although his face was sallow and ashen to begin with. "And then spend your life at hard labor on account of that bastard?"

There was no telling how, perhaps he had been eavesdropping, or perhaps someone had run to tell him and thus get into his good graces, but Demian Iniutin learned of what Fyodor had said. It did not anger him. He smiled a nasty smile and said.

"That's just what I expected. The same breed comes from the same seed. Look at that whelp! Well, my boy, I don't know whether you'll run me through or not, but I'd say I've already run you through."

From that day on Demian stopped hiring the Savelyevs altogether. He knew what he was doing, for there was no other paid work to be had in the village except working for Kaftanov. Silanty tried finding work in Shantara and the neighboring villages, and he sometimes succeeded in

getting an odd job here or there.

Fyodor fished on the Gromotukha, and in the winter he trapped hares. The family existed on this, more or less, but it was impossible to make ends meet. They were wearing out the last of their clothes. There were no furnishings left in the house, save the table, some stools and few iron pots.

That spring, just before the spring waters rose, Silanty was on his way home from a job in a nearby village. He had a three-ruble bill in the pocket of his tattered short coat, money he had earned there. He had to reach home before the ice broke on the river. He crossed the Gromotukha, and soon after a sledge drawn by a pair of horses decked out with bells overtook him. He stepped aside to let it pass, but it pulled up beside him.

"Hey! Where are you coming from, Silanty?" It was Kaftanov.

"From Gusevka. I had a job there for a month."

"How come? Why aren't you working for me?" Kaftanov was drunk and in high spirits. His eyes glittered. His large nose was as red as a tomato. There seemed to be a woman bundled up in a sheepskin coat deep inside the sledge.

"I haven't been working for you for a long time, Mikhail Lukich. Demian won't let me."

"How come? You're the best worker hereabouts. Come on, climb in! "

Silanty got up on the driver's box.

"Drive to Ognev Springs. And don't spare the horses! "

Well, he would do as he was told. Silanty did not care any more. Kaftanov was obviously on one of his sprees.

There was a stout, four-room log house, a stable, a bathhouse and some outbuildings at the forest retreat. The bathhouse had been built on the lakeshore. There were huge pikes in the lake. In the summers Kaftanov like to dive straight into the water after taking a steam-bath and swim there at length.

The sound of the bells brought a young man out of the house. It was Polikarp Kruzhillin, who had formerly been a clerk in Kaftanov's shop in Shantara. He grabbed the bridles. Savelyev knew that the stocky youth with the

curly black hair and deep eyes had been at the retreat since the previous fall, serving as Kaftanov's caretaker. Silanty had often been to the shop in Shantara, and whenever his eyes had met those of the clerk he had thought: "He's a slippery character. He'll cheat you and never bat an eye." Silanty did not know why Kaftanov had demoted him to being a caretaker, but who could ever understand Kaftanov's willfulness and crazy character? Then again, Silanty did not actually know whether being here was a demotion or a promotion. They said the young clerk was a good dancer and that Kaftanov, when he was drunk, would make him dance till he was ready to drop, and all for the pleasure of his loose women.

Kaftanov jumped out of the sledge. He was followed by a woman who looked like a Gypsy and who also seemed to be drunk. She threw off her sheepskin coat, and her narrow eyes flashed. Kruzhilin rushed towards her to escort her into the house.

"Hands off! " Kaftanov barked and led her up the porch. When he came out of the house he tossed Kruzhilin his own sheepskin coat and fur hat. "Drive back to Mikhailovka and hand the horses over to Demian. Then go back to your job in the shop. You've done enough dancing for a while." He raised his hairy fist and waved it in front of Polikarp's face. "I've noticed you've been moseying up to my women, you bastard, whenever I'd had too much to drink. You studs have no conscience. You can thank your lucky stars I never caught you, or I'd tie a rock around your neck and throw you into the lake."

Kruzhilin put on his coat, climbed onto the box and drove off without a word.

"That takes care of that," Kaftanov said in a satisfied voice. "I guess your days of whoring are over, aren't they, Silanty? I'm taking you on here instead of Polikarp. Go on, bring in the home-brew. It's over there in the smoke-house. And get some pickled tomatoes from the cellar. What're you gaping at? Step lively. And start the oven in the bathhouse. Me and this Gypsy are going to take a steam-bath together."

Thus did Silanty come to live at the Ognev Springs retreat.

At first, it made him sick to be present at his master's orgies. Sometimes Kaftanov would drive up with a group of men and women Silanty had never seen before. For weeks on end they would drink day and night, gorge themselves, bawl songs, dance, take steam-baths together to sober up and then rush naked into the lake, squealing and roaring with laughter. Half-nude men and women sauntered shamelessly around the house and the grounds.

"It's a whorehouse. Lord have mercy, it's a real whorehouse," Silanty would sometimes whisper to himself as he would sit down to rest out of sight.

At the outset of every spree Demian Iniutin would drive up with smoked meat, bacon and ham, sweets and perhaps a crate or two of bottled wine the likes of which Silanty had never seen. Demian hardly ever spoke to him, although he would smile sourly into his stringy beard, as if to say: "To hell with you. You can stay on here as long as the master wants you."

Thus it was until this day.

Fyodor had shot up very quickly and was now nearly as tall as his father. When he came in from watering the garden his old canvas pants were rolled up above his knees, revealing his muddy legs. His thick hair, badly in need of a haircut, fell in strands across his forehead.

"What's up?" he asked in a voice that was beginning to change. He was still narrow-shouldered, and his shoulder-blades protruded sharply. His long arms nearly reached his knees, but his hands were already the large, strong hands of a man. There was fuzz on his upper lip, and his chest was beginning to expand.

"Wash up. You're going to the Ognev Springs retreat."

"What for?"

"Don't ask so many questions! I think Kaftanov wants you to take my place."

Fyodor's small eyes blazed, but he quickly snuffed out the flame. He had been at the retreat many a time (true, in the absence of Kaftanov and his guests), and he knew exactly what his father's job was.

"It's not Kaftanov. It's Lusha who has an eye on

Fyodor," Silanty said unhappily when the boy had gone off to wash. "She struts around there, jiggling her tits like a bitch in heat. Kaftanov's been drinking with her for three days steady."

"They'll ruin the boy. Dear Lord! They'll ruin him," Ustinya moaned. "I won't let him go. I won't! "

"No? They've already whipped us into line. Next time, they'll use a club. What can we do? "

After Fyodor had washed and dressed, Silanty handed him the reins to Kaftanov's gig and said, "Lusha's with the master there now. God forbid you even come close to her. Mind my words: Kaftanov'll wring your neck like a chicken's at the drop of a hat. If Lusha starts pestering you, whack her hard. Kaftanov'll put it down to your credit."

"Why'll she pester me? " Fyodor said and blushed. He had never known a woman, but being a village boy, sex was no mystery to him.

"You just watch your step, son! I know what I'm talking about. And you know what Kaftanov's like when he gets mad."

And so Fyodor drove off, his emotions that of mingled fear and curiosity.

It was still light when he reached the retreat and entered the house. Kaftanov, having moved all the dirty plates into the middle of the table, had laid his head on it. Lusha Kashkarova, wearing a high-necked buttoned blouse and a long, creased skirt, was shaking him, now going around to one side, now to the other, and saying,

"You've got to get some sleep, Mikhail Lukich. Mikhail Lukich...."

"Here I am," Fyodor announced.

Lusha paid no attention to him. She was a woman of about twenty-five or thirty, with a body as supple as a snake's, full-breasted and broad-bottomed ("She's slim, but low-keeled," Kaftanov said of her), moved softly and lightly across the room. She was quite steady on her feet, but Fyodor could tell she was very drunk.

"Ah! " Kaftanov drawled, hearing Fyodor's voice. He raised his head. "Come over here."

Fyodor went up to the table. Kaftanov clutched the

boy's chin with his steely fingers, and his bleary eyes searched Fyodor's face.

"You'll do. You're still a snot-nosed kid. But if I ever catch you, you bastard ... and if you!" he said, turning to Lusha, "I'll truss you both and toss you into the lake!"

"What're you saying Mikhail Lukich! I'm sick and tired of that old Silanty's sour puss. And the way he looked at me, like he was knifing me. Come on now, your head's heavy. Try to get some sleep."

"Yes. Might as well."

Lusha led him off to an adjoining room, and Fyodor heard her putting him to bed, pulling off his boots and then dropping each one.

He went outside.

Fyodor stabled the horse and wandered about the yard, not knowing what to do. He went back inside and looked at the door to the room Lusha had taken Kaftanov into. He could hear the sound of snoring coming from there.

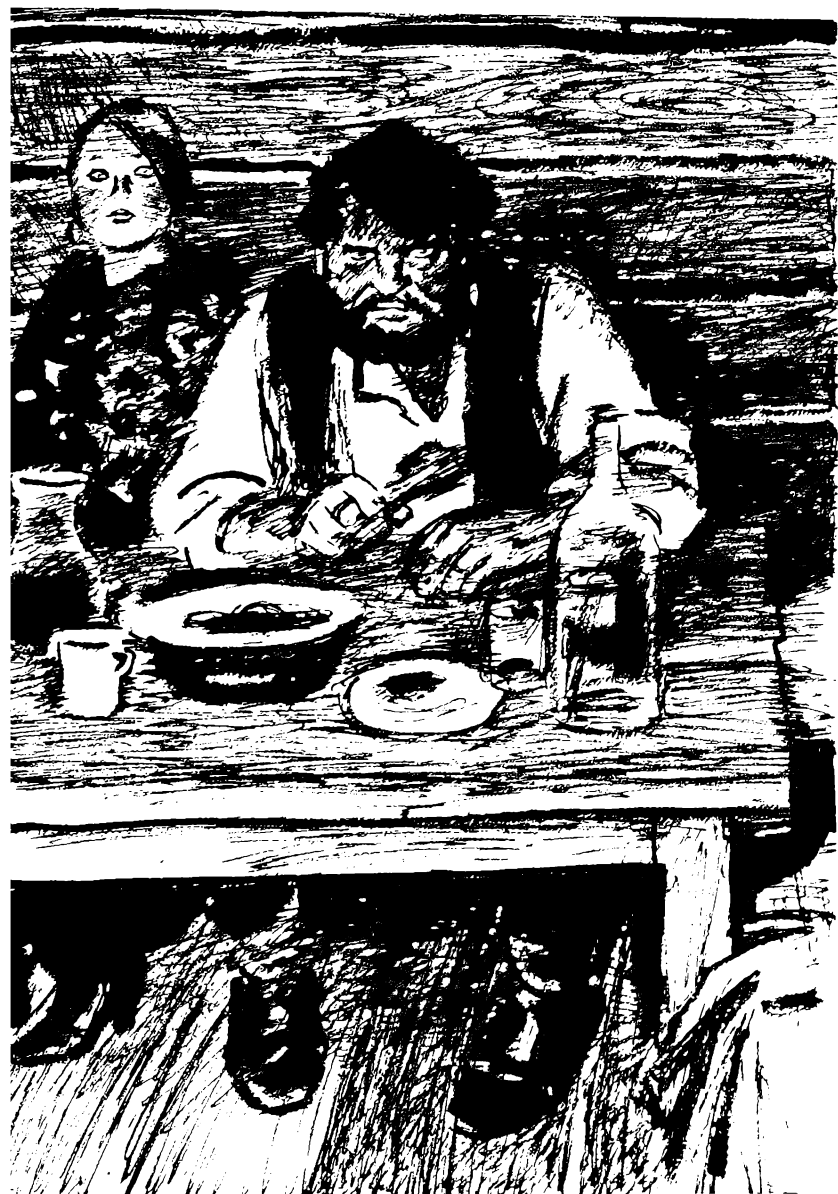
Trying not to make any noise, he cleared the table and cleaned up the room. It was still light, so he decided to go fishing. "Maybe they'll want some chowder tomorrow," he decided.

Fyodor knew where his father's rods and tackle were. He also found a can of worms which his father had probably dug the day before or perhaps even that very morning.

He sat on the bank among the reeds until darkness fell, pulling in a carp every now and then. However, he could not shake off the image of Lusha. In his mind's eye he could see her bulging breasts beneath her blouse, her broad behind and tangled hair. The blood rushed to his head. He tried to drive the vision of her away and to think of something else, but she would not be put out of his mind.

He went to bed in his father's little room, locking it with the large iron hook on the door. He kept tossing around, unable to fall asleep and finally dozed off in the small hours of the night.

Fyodor came to with a start from a cautious rap on his door. His heart began to pound. "Who's there?" he croaked.



"Get up. The master wants you." It was Lusha.

"Be right there," he said after a moment's hesitation. "Why can't that old bastard sleep through the night like everybody else?" he was thinking.

Dawn was just beginning to break. Through the window he could see the edge of the sky turning blue above the treetops. He pushed open the window and heard the call of lonely bird. The brisk morning air burst into his lungs. He pulled on his boots and raised the hook. Opening the door, he took a step back, for there, shimmering like a pale ghost was Lusha.

The apparition moved into the room, shut the door, threw on the hook, spread its arms wide and advanced towards him. Fyodor's back was plastered against the wall. His knees ached.

Lusha came up close, grasped his head with both hands and began kissing his cheeks and chin passionately, searching for his lips. She smelled of stale home-brew and of something else that was sickly sweet. Fyodor twisted his head this way and that, trying to escape her hot, moist lips.

"Get out ... get out of here!" he rasped in a strangled voice.

"Ah! You're still a suckling babe. You haven't been tasted yet," she giggled and forced his cheek down upon her naked breast.

Coming thus in contact with a woman's body for the first time in his life, Fyodor became dizzy. There was a ringing in his ears. He finally fought free of her.

He came to his senses in the dense underbush, and it took him quite some time to figure out whether it was his own heart pounding or whether the sound was coming from inside Lusha's chest under his cheek.

A crimson dawn was spreading across the sky. The air was full of birds' singing. He could hear someone's steps in the grass close by.

"Fyodor ... Fyodor...." Lusha called softly. "What'd you get scared of, silly? Silly boy!"

Fyodor pressed closer to the ground. The steps moved off and died away. "If I hadn't opened the window, I'd never have gotten away. Not on your life," he was think-

ing. He lay there in the bushes for a long while. The sun had risen, but, still, he lay there until at last the chill of the ground made his chest ache. Then he got up and trudged back to the house.

Kaftanov, looking bleary and bloated, was sitting at the table chewing on some smoked meat. A bottle and a glass had been placed by his plate. Lusha sat beside him huddled up in a shawl.

"Where the hell were you, for crissake?" Kaftanov demanded. "And why are your knees all green? What were you crawling around in the grass for? Hm? Answer me!"

"Why'd she pester me?" Fyodor suddenly said, indicating Lusha with a toss of his head.

She flashed him a beseeching glance.

"Now wait a minute," Kaftanov dropped the bone he had been gnawing on. "What do you mean by pestering?"

"What I said. She said, 'Get up, Mikhail Lukich's calling you.' So I opened the door and she ... when the sun was just coming up."

"Quit lying, you dog!" Lusha screeched.

"Shut up!" Kaftanov crushed out her voice as with a stone. "And then what?"

Fyodor did not know what to say. He recalled his father's warning, and for some reason he felt sorry for Lusha. But he feared for his own safety. Who could tell how Kaftanov would take it, and what he would do. "I really am a bastard," Fyodor thought. "I shouldn't have told on her. I shouldn't have said I was out fishing. There's enough fish here to prove it. But how'll I get out of it now? I'm just getting into more trouble."

"What's the matter? Lose your tongue? Answer me!"

Whipped on by the curt order, Fyodor said, "I am not lying! You're the one who pressed me to your tits."

"You've no shame! You're lying! It's a lie, Mikhail Lukich."

Kaftanov paid no attention to her. He poured himself a full glass of vodka, downed it and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Hand me that whip there, Fyodor. There it is, on the wall."

"Mikhail Lukich!" Lusha screamed, slipping off her chair and throwing her arms around Kaftanov's boots.

Fyodor took down the heavy, four-sided whip and handed it to Kaftanov who rose, kicked Lusha into the middle of the room and simultaneously brought the whip down across her body. The very first lash split her tight-fitting blouse. Fyodor saw a red welt rise on Lusha's smooth back. She gasped and crawled off to the wall on her hands and knees. There she jumped to her feet.

Holding her arms up to her face to shield it from the whip, she dashed about the room, while Kaftanov lashed out at her savagely, shouting,

"You wet-assed bitch! Got a hankering for tender meat, did you? I'll kill you! "

The whip cut through the air with a whistling sound. Kaftanov was breathing hard. Lusha kept screaming. She could not locate the door. Fyodor, fearful lest the whip come down on him, too, crouched in a corner.

At last Lusha fell back against the door and out into the dark corridor beyond. From there she tumbled out to the porch and down the steps. She bounded up, clutched the shreds of her blouse to her bosom, and ran down the road to Mikhailovka.

Later Kaftanov and Fyodor sat at the table, conversing amiably. Kaftanov was polishing off the bottle and questioning Fyodor in detail about Lusha's visit to his room. At first, Fyodor felt shy, but then he mustered up his courage and disclosed all, including Lusha's search for him in the bushes.

"So," Kaftanov said with satisfaction and began pacing up and down heavily.

Fyodor's eyes followed him cautiously, but there was nothing menacing in the expression on his master's face. On the contrary, he was smiling lazily and good-naturedly into his beard.

"Women are a sticky breed, boy. A pack of vixen if there ever was one. And every fox is after a chicken, even in her sleep."

Kaftanov bent to pick up the whip. Fyodor's stool crashed to the floor as he darted off towards the far corner.

Tapping the tip of the whip handle against his palm, Kaftanov's moist, bloodshot eyes appraised Fyodor.

"You'll grow up to be a real bastard, I see. And maybe that's what I like about you just now. As for what happens later, time'll tell. Meanwhile, you can live here with your pa. I'll send him back now. You'll be scared living here all alone, and you might set fire to the place by accident. Go on, harness the horse. What're you shivering there for?"

Fyodor lived at the retreat with his father until autumn. It was a good, easy life. Together they put aside a couple of stacks of hay for the horses. Actually, there was no other work for them to do.

Fyodor fished, went berry-picking, tended the vegetable garden and hunted ducks in the reeds with Kaftanov's gun. He had never handled a gun before, but soon became such a good shot he could tag a duck on the wing.

"What do you know!" his father would say with undisguised admiration when Fyodor would bring back a dozen ducks. "You've a good eye!"

"Ah, this is nothing! What I'd like to do is go bear-hunting. Huh, Pa? I've tracked one down. It comes to graze in the raspberry patch behind the hill. Give me a couple of big shells."

"Quit talking about bears. Are you out of your head? A bear'll fix you good," Silanty said and hid the shells in a safe place.

Whenever Kaftanov came down with his "whore-house", as Silanty called them, the place would begin to rock. Drunken, bawdy songs, shouting, laughing and screeching echoed over the forest and the lake from sunup to sundown.

In the beginning Silanty tried to somehow shield his son from the filth, and at the first sound of wheels bumping over the forest road and drunken voices, he took down the shotgun, shoved it at his son and said, "Go on to the lakes back of the woods. Don't you fire a single shot anyplace around here or you'll scare his lady-friends."

"What's the matter, Pa? Don't you want me to help you here?"

"Get going! I don't want to see hide nor hair of you!"

A moment later Silanty realized that his cunning was in vain. Kaftanov burst into the house and shouted, "Hey, Fyodor! Where are you?"

"He's gone. He's been out in the woods since early this morning."

"What do you mean? Bring him back! I pay you for being here."

"Let the boy off from this, won't you, Mikhail Lukich?" Silanty pleaded.

"Shut up! If I let him off, I'll let both of you go. Like Demian keeps telling me to. Is that what you want? You'll starve to death if I do. Get out the wine and the home-brew! And bring the food in from the carriage! You can live here for as long as I'll have you. And as soon as Fyodor shows up, send him in to me."

Fyodor returned at sunset.

"Go on inside," Silanty said with a sigh, avoiding his son's eyes. "He's asked for you at least six times. What'd you do to make him like you?"

It was smoky and stifling inside the house despite the open windows. Bearded men and drunken, perspiring women were sitting around the table, singing a mournful song.

"Ah, there you are! Quiet, everybody!" Kaftanov yelled. "This is Fyodor, my man Silanty's son. He's going to be a real bright fellow. Sit down next to your master, boy, and join in the fun."

Kaftanov was drunk. His guests were drunker still. They had apparently not understood who Fyodor was and, taking him for Kaftanov's kid, began embracing him in turn. Fyodor twisted away from the bearded, stubbly faces and pushed away the women who stank of perspiration. Kaftanov seemed to be enjoying it.

"All right, that's enough!" he shouted at last. "Stop it, ladies, you've got him full of spit. Ah, what a bunch of mares! But he's an upstanding boy. He doesn't give a damn for any of you! Next time I'll bring him a present for being so good. I'll bring him a real lively girl. Just for him. Or do you want Lusha Kashkarova? Hm? I'll make that bitch wash your feet and drink the water after. Well, do you want her? Tell me!"

"N-no," Fyodor mumbled warily.

"Right you are!" Kaftanov burst out laughing. "Good for you. You're too young for that yet. But you watch us

and get used to it. Keep your eyes open. And if you feel like it, just tell me. I'll set you up right away. If I'll do anything for him! If you want me to, I'll even make you my son. If you deserve it. And now, have a glass of vodka, and then you and your pa get the bathhouse ready. I'm just giving you one glass. You'll have to grow some till you get another. And don't forget what I said. I can pave the way to a good life for you."

Until then Fyodor had only tried home-brew twice in his life and had not liked the taste of it. On both occasions he had ended up with a splitting headache and had then been nauseous. Nevertheless, he dared not disobey Kaftanov, and downed his drink.

The liquor affected him as it had previously. As he dragged pails of lake water to fill the boiler in the bathhouse, he felt he was about to throw up, but could not. The terrible feeling of nausea did not go away.

"How can they drink it?" he complained to his father.

"Wet your head with cold water. No, I'll tell you what, go for a swim."

Fyodor did as he was told and felt revived.

"It's a good thing you can't stomach homebrew. But what was Kaftanov blubbering about? I was just coming in and heard some of what he said."

"What's the use asking, if you heard?"

"Ah, son.... Words are like honey, but see you don't choke on it. He was talking about you being a son to him. He needs you like he needs a hole in the head."

He sat down by the water's edge. Fyodor poked about in the sand with a twig.

"What if he really does, Pa? With him to help me, maybe I'll really amount to something."

Fyodor was speaking thoughtfully, unhurriedly. For the first time his father sensed something that was not childish, no longer childish in his words. He was stunned.

"You mean you've actually grown up? Good Lord."

The sun had dipped beyond the forest half an hour before, and the sky was filling with the cool of twilight. Mosquitoes droned above them. Every now and then a fish would splash in the lake, sending concentric circles across the black surface of the water. The circles would eventual-

ly reach them and disappear at their feet.

The drunken shouting of Kaftanov's guests issued from the house and drifted off into the darkening evening.

"I'll tell you what, son," Silanty said after they had been silent for a long time. "You be just as wary of what he said as you are of homebrew. It's like the saying goes: he was so happy to have a crumb he lost the cake."

"Who do you think I am? I'm not that dumb. Why should he be so good to me all of a sudden? There's something funny about it. But don't forget what he said was: if I deserve it. Maybe he meant something special. I can try hard. It won't kill me. And we'll see how things'll turn out. Besides, he has a daughter."

"What? What's that? " Silanty was dumbfounded.

"What of it? " Fyodor turned to face him, looking straight into his father's eyes.

"What're you talking about? For shame! "

"Didn't you ever hear of a rich girl marrying a poor boy before? "

"You were never like this before." Silanty sounded worried. "Aren't you getting ahead of yourself? Besides, Anna's still a baby. She's only nine."

"What's the rush? I can wait." Fyodor rose.

Once again it seemed to Silanty that this was not his fifteen-year-old son speaking, but a mature stranger, a man he did not know. "When'd you think of all this? When'd you cook it all up? "

"I don't know, Pa. Maybe it was when he was beating Lusha and then he and me sat at the table talking. And maybe it was today. There's a reason why he said he'd make me like a son if I deserved it. He wasn't all that drunk when he said it."

"Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! " Silanty moaned.

Kaftanov had his spree, and he and his guests departed. Things returned to normal at the retreat. Yet, something had changed in the relationship between father and son. They became more reserved and hardly spoke. Fyodor seemed lost in thought, as if he were constantly recalling the past. Sometimes he would take a boat out to the middle of the lake, but since he often forgot his rods he would stretch out in the prow with his head on his crossed

arms and stare up at the vacant sky for hours. Silanty kept an eye on him and sighed, although he never again returned to the conversation they had had outside the bath-house that day.

His parents' fears that living at the retreat would ruin Fyodor seemed to have been in vain. As on that first occasion, Fyodor would sometimes join his master for a small glass of vodka, but never more. He never showed any interest in Kaftanov's lady-friends. When one or another of them, having had too much to drink, would sidle up to him in jest or in earnest he never hesitated to slap her face and say, "Get your hands off me, you bitch. What you need is to have your legs tied in a double knot."

Kaftanov seemed to approve. "I'll tell you what, ladies. Anyone of you who can lay my Fyodor here gets a hundred rubles! Go to it!" he would say and chuckle.

On one occasion he brought Lusha Kashkarova along as one of his party.

"Here she is, Fyodor my boy," he said, slapping Lusha's firm rump. "She's nagged me to death, begging me to bring her here so's she can see you."

"I never said that, Mikhail Lukich!"

"Let's not have any backtalk!" Kaftanov turned away, as if he had forgotten all about her.

Kaftanov and his party had spent three days at the retreat, and in all that time a drunken Lusha had followed Fyodor like a shadow, lying in wait for him, trying to get her arms around him.

"Get your hands off me, you bitch," he said, repeating his usual phrase and shoving her away, while all the other members of the party bellowed and whistled in glee.

Towards evening of the second day, finding a moment when no one was watching, she whispered to him in what sounded like a sober, plaintive voice, "Take pity on me, Fyodor. Can't you see they're all putting on a show? I can't go against Mikhail Lukich's orders."

"I don't care! Leave me alone!" He left the house and went to spend the night in the forest, sleeping in a haystack. On the third day he armed himself with the very same whip Kaftanov had used on Lusha.

"So nothing's come of it, you filthy tramp!" Kafta-

nov bellowed with drunken malice as he shook his dishevelled head and bloated face. "So your wiles aren't good enough? You'd better step lively. Today's your last chance."

Since this was the party's last day at the retreat, it was Fyodor's duty, as always, to make the stove in the bathhouse. He stuck the whip handle into the top of his boot, brought in pail after pail of water for the huge boiler and sat down to rest in the sun outside the bathhouse. Silanty made the stove and came out to sit beside him.

"Get out of sin's way, Fyodor. Take your gun and go into the woods. You don't know but what Kaftanov might lock you up in the bathhouse with that sow. What's it to them? They've lost anything Christian there ever was in them."

"Maybe they did, but I've found it. I knew straight off it wasn't Lusha. It's Kaftanov who's playing cat-and-mouse with me. But I'll beat him at his own game."

"Just how're you going to do that?"

"Don't worry, I will. Move off, Pa. There's Lusha coming out of the house looking for me. Go on."

The old man rose with a groan and trudged off to the stable.

"Fyodor, Fyodor!" Lusha called, hurrying towards the bathhouse.

"Get out of here!" he pushed her in the chest and went behind the structure.

"Take pity on me, Fyodor," she pleaded, catching up with him.

He could see the faces of Kaftanov's guests bobbing back and forth in the windows. Noticing them, he grabbed Lusha by the hair and tossed her to the ground. Her legs were bared as she rolled over the grass. Fyodor snatched the whip from his boot-top and began whipping her insanely across her bare legs, back and head. A drunken roar of cat-calls, shouting and whistling came from the house. Lusha tried to get up, but fell again. Then she tried to make herself small, to shield her head with her arms as she shuddered under each blow.

Fyodor came to his senses when someone grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and shook him hard.

"What if you maim the woman?" Kaftanov shouted with his beard so close it was practically scratching him. "What if you knock out her eye, then what?"

"Then why's she trying to lay me?" Fyodor shouted and lurched, but could not break free of Kaftanov's grip.

"He's a regular tiger!" Kaftanov said and suddenly began to laugh. He let go of Fyodor, prodded Lusha with the tip of his boot and said, "Go on." Then, addressing Fyodor, he said, "You come along with me. We'll have a glass of vodka and go to the bathhouse."

"And I won't drink, either. I can't."

"All right, you don't have to," Kaftanov conceded. "Just sit by me while I do. And then you come along to the bathhouse with me. For the first steam. I only like the first steam."

Two hours later Fyodor was yawning like a fish tossed up on the shore as he lay on the cool, slippery floor boards of the bathhouse, while Kaftanov was enjoying the steam on one of the high plank ledges, slapping his bare body vigorously with a cluster of birch twigs and leaves.

"Fyodor!" he would yell every now and then from where he sat hidden by the billows of steam. "Toss another dipper of kvas on the stones." Fyodor would get up and instantly feel as if his ears, nose, cheeks and head had been scalded. He would quickly dip some kvas from a little cask, especially made by his father for the purpose, splash it onto the red-hot stones and drop to the floor. "It's a wonder he doesn't get cooked there," he said to himself as he gasped for air.

Having steamed himself to his heart's content, Kaftanov would race outside nude and plunge into the lake. He would float around in the cold water like a heavy log, then run back into the bathhouse, pull on a pair of leather mittens and a hat for protection against the steam and climb the steps to the high ledge again.

As he was dressing in the adjoining dressing room, he said, "That's the best way to sober up. Nothing beats it. Now I'll be ready for business again in the morning. Yes, indeed! Like the saying goes, drink up, but don't forget to stop. Feel sleepy?"

"It's awfully hot."

"Polikarp could take a lot of real hot steam. He was a good bathhouse attendant. Too bad I had to get rid of him, but he was getting a funny look in his eye. And it wasn't because of some dame. Nah. Dames are like shit. You can get them for the asking. He could've had anyone he wanted here. I wouldn't mind. That's what God made them for. But that look in his eye was something that went against the grain. Everything would be fine and dandy, and then, all of a sudden, he'd look at me as if he was going to run me through with a knife. That bastard. 'What were you just thinking about?' I'd say, and he'd say, 'Nothing special.' Maybe he was telling the truth, but there was something funny about it, and I don't like anything I can't understand. He's a good clerk, but if he doesn't get rid of that look in his eye no amount of good work is going to stop me from getting rid of him. And quick. Now, take you. You don't have that kind of a look. But maybe you will later on. Hm? "

"I don't know. What kind of a look do you mean? " As Fyodor spoke he was thinking, "He's lying. He didn't mean what he just said about women. He's trying to trap me."

"Hm. Never mind. Time will tell. Give me another sip of kvas."

After pulling on his underpants, Kaftanov took pains to towel dry his hairy, sweaty chest. "I'll tell you something, Fyodor, and not when I'm drunk, but when I'm dead sober. Don't believe what I said about adopting you. I have a son of my own. Zinovy. He'll be the head of the family and the business after I'm gone. He's getting to know the business now, but I don't bring him here. There's no sense in it. He's too young for this. When his time comes he'll get his share of wild parties. But I can set you up good in life if you'll serve me faithfully. If you'll be as faithful as a dog. I need people I can trust, Fyodor. Men like Demian Iniutin. That was God's gift to me. But God doesn't often send along a man like Demian. That's why I have to shape them up myself. I thought I could make something out of Polikarp Kruzhilin, but I was mistaken. Not after his eyes began to glitter like that. Now I have my eye on you. Understand? Besides, I've got to have some-

one to take Demian's place some day."

"Sure. I'm trying my best, Mikhail Lukich." Fyodor's heart skipped a beat.

"Well, Fyodor, I've shown you my hand. You're still a kid, but I want you to start thinking about your future early in the game. It all depends on you. Your old man's a hard worker, and he's honest, and he should've passed the same things on to you. He was just unlucky. He couldn't latch onto the tail of his star. Well, I'm putting this tail right into your hands. There's very few people I'd do that for."

When he was fully dressed he smiled and said, "You shouldn't have behaved like you did towards Lusha. You really are still a kid. Did you ever try sleeping with a woman? "

"No," Fyodor turned crimson.

"I had a look at you in the bathhouse, and you're all right. You've got everything a man's supposed to have. And you can do a man's job."

"I won't, Mikhail Lukich."

"That's what you think. Your time'll come."

"I don't know. I don't feel like getting dirty."

"Don't worry, it won't make you any worse."

"I don't know. Sometimes I think that some day, I'll probably get married. I want to come to her clean."

"You don't say?" Kaftanov drawled. "I keep wondering more and more about you, boy. That time you squealed on Lusha I knew what you were up to. I thought...."

"Why'd you say I squealed on her? "

"Well, didn't you? Real innocence is something you'll hardly ever find nowadays. Every man's out to get what he can for himself. I had a feeling you got something out of it, too, when you squealed on her."

Fyodor shrugged, intimating that he did not understand what Kaftanov was talking about. And he said, "Wasn't I supposed to say anything? She sneaked away from you, didn't she? I'd have been cheating on you if I didn't tell you, Mikhail Lukich."

Kaftanov squinted. His eyes bored through Fyodor. However, Fyodor did not turn away. He stood there, blinking innocently.

"Hm. I wish it was so. That would be just great. But I don't believe in one hundred per cent honesty, you know. I've learned not to. For a moment there I thought that even though you're still a kid, you're learning to mind your p's and q's."

Kaftanov rose from the bench and walked towards the door.

"All right, Fyodor. Even though I'm a whoremonger and a drunk, I'm good at sizing people up. I'll just keep an eye on you and find out soon enough what sort of a fellow you are."

* * *

Silanty, too, often found himself thinking about what sort of a person his son Fyodor was turning out to be.

After the day Fyodor had first whipped Lusha and then gone to the bathhouse to tend to Kaftanov, he had practically stopped speaking to his father. Sometimes, as they sat at the table together, Fyodor would stir the food in his bowl for long minutes on end, and Silanty would sense that his son's thoughts were elsewhere.

"What new schemes are you cooking up?" Silanty would say.

"Nothing special."

Autumn was upon them, and the old aspens turned bloody red in the forest, while the tops of the birches, burned dry at last after the heat of the summer, were becoming yellow. It was still warm, but there was a feeling in the air that chill winds would soon bring rain and cover the faded grass with heavy, wet leaves. So far, however, the drooping and now-sparse forest grasses were still unencumbered, although more and more often Fyodor would come upon young birches and aspens that had neat little circles of dry leaves around the foot of their trunks. That meant a squirrel had recently leaped upon a yellow branch, and the weight of its body had sent the dry leaves rustling down.

It was harvesting time on Kaftanov's fields, and perhaps that was why the master had stopped coming to his retreat.

"Mikhail Lukich'd been fasting for a long time," Fyodor repeated unintentionally on several occasions.

The first two times he had said that Silanty made no comment, but on the third he said, "Don't tell me you miss that whorehouse crowd? "

"I couldn't care less," Fyodor replied and shrugged. However, a moment later he added unexpectedly, "Whorehouse or not, Kaftanov lives high on the hog. He has a good life."

"So. You mean you envy him? "

"Ah, you don't understand a thing."

Fyodor mused over this irritably for several days, unwilling to admit, and perhaps not really understanding, that envy of his master's wild life had indeed stirred within him, seeping into his very soul, eating away at its softest, least resistant parts. Thus does a tiny stream trickle along a grassy ditch until it suddenly finds a place where the grass has been trampled and the earth is softer, and so it begins to wash the soil away, bit by bit, and carry it off. When the spring waters abate you see a little ridge, no higher than your shoe. Brown, black and white grass roots protrude from its side. The ridge presents no threat to anyone. One crosses it without actually noticing it.

However, rainwaters, coursing down the same little ditch, continue to wash away the soil from the foot of the ridge. It is soon twice as deep, and if there have been frequent thunderstorms, even three or four times as deep as it was. In winter snow fills the hollow to the top, and may even add another meter over it. The following spring the snow will settle in the hollow a week before it settles anyplace else, baring the cold ridge and the trickle of melt water running down the still-frozen slope from under the heavy blanket of snow.

The sun begins to warm the ground, melting the icy crust on the ridge. Now meltwaters are rushing down the half-meter-high ridge, gurgling and bubbling, washing away the soil below by the handful. The third spring a regular waterfall has formed on the small ravine, throwing up a rainbow spray in the sun. The fourth spring a little river rushes and tumbles along, carrying off clumps of soil, tangles of grass and small trees. Several more years pass.

Someone revisiting the spot will gasp to see the deep, black, ugly ravine cutting across the emerald-green field. And this ravine keeps on growing and growing, like a running sore, and the field seems to be moaning, but cannot heal it over.

Fyodor, unaware that envy of Kaftanov's way of life was raising its ugly head, awaited the return of his master impatiently. "Will he have one woman this time, or will he bring in a slew of them like he did last time?" he wondered, and for some reason or other his heart began to thud. "Maybe he'll bring Lusha again."

If Kaftanov were to bring her, and if she were to pester him again, Fyodor would have whipped her again. He knew this for a fact. Still and all, despite himself, he kept recalling that night she had come knocking at his door to cross the dark room, arms extended, and then press his face against her bare breast passionately. He felt dizzy as he recalled the moment. The blood in his veins seemed on fire. "For Christ's sake, leave me alone," he would say to himself, grit his teeth so hard his jaw ached. He would run to the lake, dive into the cold water and swim deep down, seeking out the coldest underwater streams.

At night he would again dream of Lusha and of Kaftanov's other lady-friends as they sat around the table half-naked and drunk, as they lay around on the beds, or trooped off to the bathhouse, men and women together, to rush out laughing and squealing and plunge into the lake, their naked bodies flashing.

"Dammit," Fyodor would say and sit bolt upright in his bed, pressing his arm against the side where his heart was pounding wildly.

"What's the matter?" his father would say.

"Nothing. I had a nightmare."

Suddenly, his life took an unexpected turn.

One night, when Fyodor could not fall asleep for a long time, as usual, he suddenly thought he heard someone rap on the window. He sat up quickly and held his breath. Once again someone scratched on the window pane, and a vague shadow loomed and was gone.

"Pa!" Fyodor shouted and grabbed his shotgun.

"What? Who?"

"There's someone outside there. Maybe it's a bear. No, the horses are quiet."

"Don't be silly. You're having one of your nightmares."

Fyodor got out of bed and padded up to the window. There, under a tree some distance away, he saw a man.

"Honest to God, Pa. There's somebody out there by the pine tree. I'm going to see who it is."

"Stop! Maybe he's a criminal. A runaway convict. Get back! "

But Fyodor had passed through the pantry, opened the outside door softly, jumped off the porch and was creeping along the side of the house and around the corner. He approached the tree soundlessly and raised his gun. "Hey, you! " Then, seeing that the man had swayed, he added, "Don't make a move! This is a shotgun. It'll take off half your head. Who are you? What do you want? "

"Who are you? Is it you, Fyodor? " The man spoke in a whisper.

"Yes. Who are you? "

"Put down your gun. You don't want to kill your own brother, do you? "

"What? Which brother? "

"Are you and Pa here alone? "

"Yes," Fyodor mumbled, having completely lost his bearings.

Thus, after an absence of many years, did Silanty Savelyev's elder son Anton suddenly reappear.

"Good Lord! Is it really you, Anton? How'd you find us? Where are you coming from? " Silanty stammered a few minutes later as he hastily lit the lamp and bustled about the table. "This really is a surprise. What's wrong with your arm? "

Anton's right arm was swathed in dirty rags and was suspended in a kerchief sling.

"I hit it on a branch."

"But why'd you come at night? Are you hiding out from anybody? "

"You see, Pa, it's like this. I don't want to be seen around in the daytime for a while. I was home, and Ma said you were here."

"Lord! Do you mean you've escaped from prison? You mean Demian Iniutin was telling the truth? "

"I guess he was," Anton smiled. Then he turned to Fyodor. "You really got me by surprise. To tell you the truth, I kept wondering how my kid brother was making out, and whether he wasn't growing up to be a sissy. I see I was wrong."

"It's all your teaching," Fyodor muttered.

"Look how big he's got, Pa! He's a grown man, sure enough. And Ivan's growing up, too. I remember when I left he was knee-high to a grasshopper, and now.... Time really flies."

"Let's see your arm."

"It's in bad shape, Pa. You're my only hope. Maybe you can fix it up." Anton began unwinding the rags. "Get us some water, Fyodor."

"On a branch, you say? " Silanty breathed, staring at his son's swollen, purple arm. "Was it a bullet? "

"They weren't using slingshots. Do you have any iodine here? You know, it's a kind of medicine."

"Where'd we get any medicine here? Never you mind, we'll try to manage with herbs."

They did not know this Anton. He was a stranger, tall and well-built, his forehead more prominent, a wave to his thick blond hair, and keen gray eyes. There was a curl to the blond stubble on his cheeks and chin.

He was not wearing a convict's stripes but was dressed in an old, still decent jacket, a pair of canvas pants and a grimy cap with a small, stiff visor.

"Pa guessed right. He said maybe it was an escaped convict," Fyodor said as he poured some water over Anton's wounded arm.

"First of all, I haven't been sentenced to hard labor yet. If they catch me now, though, I pretty sure will be. And then again, Fyodor, there's all kinds of people being sentenced to hard labor. There are criminals there, but there are decent men, too."

"Meaning you'll be one of the decent once? I mean, if they catch you? "

"Well, I'm sure not a criminal." Anton winked at him.

"Have something to eat, son. Have something to eat,"

Silanty said as he bustled about the table again, setting out some bowls and then quickly sliced a loaf of bread. "Maybe you want a drink?"

"Yes, I think I do. Ma told me all about this place. I think Kaftanov's out inspecting his fields. So maybe he won't show up tonight."

"He shouldn't. Anyway, Iniutin usually comes around a day or two beforehand to bring in the food. He was the one who told us you'd been arrested a couple of years ago. You mean you've been in jail all this time?"

"No. I was out every so often. Anyway, Pa, I have to hide out here for a while till my arm heals. I can't show up anyplace with it looking like this."

"You do that, son. You stay here with us. Stay here a year if you want to, and nobody'll ever find you. As soon as it gets light I'll go find some good herbs in the woods. There's good ones to get rid of the puss. The main thing is to be on the lookout for when Kaftanov shows up with his party. But you can hear them screaming and screeching a mile away."

"What about Iniutin? We never hear him coming till he's already here," Fyodor said.

"You're right about that. He's a sly old fox. Never mind, we'll think of something. Go on, have something to eat, son. You can sleep in the hayloft over the stable till the weather turns. Then, if anyone drives up, you can get down quick and go off into the woods. The back of the stable is right up against the trees."

"That's just kind of setup I need."

Silanty returned from the woods before the sun was up. He spoke to Fyodor, "You take your gun and go to where the road passes Zhuravlinye Swamp. Stay out of sight, though. If you see anyone coming, fire a shot like you're out duck-shooting. Meanwhile, I'll make the stove in the bathhouse and brew the herbs. Anton needs a good bath. And besides...."

"All right."

Fyodor stayed hidden in the bushes until evening, watching the road and thinking about Anton. He was really frightened by his brother's arrival. In the first place, even though he wasn't a convict, he was on the run.

Secondly, what did he mean by saying he wasn't a criminal, if he'd been in jail? Decent people weren't put in jail. Thirdly, what would happen if Anton was caught here? What would Kaftanov do? The first thing he'd say would be, "How come you never said a word about your brother, Fyodor?"

When he returned to the house at twilight Anton had had a bath and looked clean and refreshed. He beamed at the sight of Fyodor and said, "Thanks for being my watchman. It was wonderful to get all that dirt off. And I soaked my arm real good. One thing, though, I think it'll be awfully boring to guard that deserted road every day. I think we'll just keep our ears cocked."

"It's all the same to me."

They spoke for a while longer, and after Anton had gone to the hayloft to sleep, Fyodor turned to his father and said,

"Who's Anton now? That's what I'd like to know. Is he a thief or a robber, or something?"

"You quit that kind of talk!"

"Then why'd they put him in jail? That's what I can't understand."

"Oh, so you can't? Well, do you think I can?" Silanty spoke as angrily as before. He turned on his bed with a sigh and added, "He said he was a political prisoner."

"What's that?"

"How do I know? He said they were fighting against the age-old 'splotation."

"What's 'splotation?"

"Quit asking so many questions! He says, 'That Kaftanov of yours is a 'sploiter.' He said Kaftanov works everybody to death, hardly pays them anything, and then pockets all the profit. That's why he has all these wild parties here, because he doesn't know what to do with his money."

"That means Kaftanov'll want to know why I didn't tell him about Anton hiding out here," was the uneasy thought that crossed Fyodor's mind. Aloud he said, "Well, I wouldn't say we had such a hard life here at the retreat, even though he is a 'sploiter or something."

"You're a damn fool, that's what you are."

Neither Demian Iniutin nor Kaftanov showed up during the following two weeks. Anton was cheerful and talkative, but Fyodor could see that he was ever on the alert. Anton spent most of the day in the hayloft, coming into the house to eat. He always took a chair that gave him a view of the road to Mikhailovka.

Anton's arm was slow in healing. Silanty brewed herbs in a large iron pot and made him soak his arm up to the elbow in it.

"The bullet must have grazed the bone. The main thing now is to warm your bone right through to the marrow. Don't worry. It'll heal."

One day it began to drizzle. It was a bleak, depressing day, and evening was upon them unexpectedly, much sooner than was usual. The three of them sat down to have their supper.

"I'll go back to my den," Anton said, glancing out the window. He laid down his spoon and rose.

"Stay a while. Not even the devil will come out in this weather," Silanty said.

"This is just the time for devils to be out. It's dark, and the rain keeps rustling. You can't see a thing, nor hear anything, either."

Anton seemed to have a sixth sense. No sooner had he climbed the ladder to the hayloft than the door opened and Demian Iniutin entered. "What're you gaping at?" he demanded as his eyes bored through Silanty and Fyodor.

"Uh, how come we didn't hear you coming?"

"You must be deaf." Demian muttered. He took off his cap and jacket, and his peg leg squeaked as he went over to the table. "I'm cold. Give me some hot tea."

Silanty poured a hot brew made of black currant leaves into a mug, and as he handed it to Demian he was struck dumb at the sight of the three dirty spoons lying on the table beside a large, empty, common bowl of buckwheat porridge. Demian, too, was staring unblinkingly at the three spoons.

Silanty snatched up a rag, as if intending to wipe the table, and swept the spoons into the bowl and then hastily set it on a shelf, dropping the rag into it. "What if he asks about the three spoons?" The thought gave him no peace.

Demian had apparently no intention of doing so. Hunching over the mug, with his thin lips puckered out, he slurped the boiling liquid. "Go get the food from the cart," he said to Fyodor. "And mind you don't smash the wine bottles. Have you got any homebrew vodka?"

"Sure! There must be about five pails left," Silanty said, feeling a wave of relief. "When're they coming?"

"How should I know? He said to bring in the smoked meat and ham and some good wine. What's this stink in here? Hm?"

"Why, it's ... I cooked up some herbs today. My bones were aching. On account of the weather. And sure enough, it started to rain."

"Well, you've stunk up the whole place. I want you to air it good by tomorrow. Couldn't you do that out in the smokehouse? There's a stove there, too."

"That's what I'll do next time for sure. And we'll air the house."

Demian left without another word. Silanty saw him to the road and heaved another sigh. "Thank God. It's blown over."

"It's blown over," he repeated to Anton when he came down from the hayloft about two hours later. "How could I have forgotten to clear away that damn spoon?"

Anton questioned him closely about where Demian had sat, which way he had looked, and every word he had uttered.

"Honest to God, he didn't suspect anything. Not a single muscle twitched on his face."

"Maybe yes, and maybe no," Fyodor spoke up suddenly. "Demian's a real snake-in-the-grass. If I was you, Anton, I'd get out quick and find a real safe place to hide."

"Shut up! Where'll he go with a bum arm?"

"Fyodor's right," Anton said thoughtfully.

"How can you? Where'll you go with a bad arm?"

"I wish I could soak it once more in that brew of yours. The puss is gone, and the color's coming back to normal. Maybe it'll heal without any more treatment."

"Maybe it will, and maybe it won't," Fyodor murmured in the same tone of voice. "That's why you have to hide out in a place where nobody'll find you, but that's

not too far away. So's Pa and me could take you food and water, and the medicine for your wound. The weather's still good enough for you to stay out for about two more weeks."

"What do you know?" Anton said and smiled as he rumbled his brother's tousled hair. Then he became silent and thoughtful again. "That really will be the best cure. Is there any place like that around here?"

"The forest is a big place," Silanty said uncertainly. "Though it's not wild hereabouts. There're men coming through off and on, and especially the women, damn them. They're all out berry-picking now."

"I think I know the place," Fyodor said. "There's never a soul there. Maybe just the devil himself."

"Where is it?" Anton asked.

"You know the cave in the Snake Gorge? At Zvenigora. You know the one I mean, don't you? I could leave here at night and be back by dawn."

"What're you talking about, stupid?" Silanty said and his sparse beard jerked up and down. "That place is knee-deep in poison snakes."

"What're you talking about, Pa? Those snakes have crawled into their holes for the winter. Two days ago I found a whole mess of them under an old stump. I lifted them out on a stick and they were like frozen ropes, and could hardly move. It's colder up on the mountain. Anton can take a sheepskin coat and a blanket. And I'll be over once or twice a week to bring him stuff."

They talked it over, discussing every angle, and finally decided there was no better hiding-place than the cave. Silanty harnessed both horses, filled a sack with several chunks of smoked meat, some flour, potatoes, two loaves of bread and an iron pot. He filled some empty bottles, since there were so many of them around, with the herb brew. Then he rolled a sheepskin coat, a pillow and a blanket up in an old raincoat.

"God bless you, son," he said to Anton. "Boil the brew at night and soak your arm in it. Make sure you don't have fire going when it's light, or someone might spot the smoke. You come right back, Fyodor, and don't race the horses. Don't get them overheated. You should be back

before sunup anyway. God forbid that Kaftanov and his whorehouse shows up here in the morning and sees the horses steaming. God bless you."

Fyodor drove Anton right up to the gorge. He tied the horses up in the dense underbrush behind some large rocks and helped Anton carry the food and clothing up to the cave. It was still dark and still drizzling intermittently when he returned to the retreat, drenched and chilled to the bone.

"Thank God you're back," Silanty said and crossed himself. "Go to bed. I hope the devil doesn't bring anyone around this morning."

No one showed up the following day. The second morning Silanty shouted to Fyodor, who was in the house, "Fyodor! Come out here, son."

Fyodor joined his father by the windows. The old man was bent over and staring at the ground.

"You lose something?"

"No. I think I found something. Have a look."

There were footprints on the damp earth.

"So what? I walked by here yesterday."

"Don't be a fool! Do you have cleats on your boots? 'Course you don't. See this? It's a cleat. And now here. See? It's like somebody stuck a pole in the ground. That's Iniutin's peg leg."

Fyodor felt icy fingers gripping his entrails.

"So maybe he was standing around here the day before yesterday."

"No. It was raining all night then. The rain would have washed his tracks away. These are fresh tracks. They were made today. Look. Here is some more. See? They lead off behind the stable. And there, across the yard."

Silanty examined the ground morosely. "They're spying on us, son," he said when they were back in the house. "They were tramping around here all night."

"Who?"

"I don't know. But it's Iniutin's doing. That old dog, he noticed those three spoons as sure as anything. Lord, how'd you ever think of getting Anton out of here? And just in the nick of time! "

Silanty hardly spoke until evening, as did Fyodor, who

was thinking irritably, "What'd that convict come here for? Now we'll have to try to get out of the mess. And what if they catch him?"

They hardly slept that night, ever on the alert for some sound, staring out of the dark windows every so often, but all seemed to be still. Towards dawn Silanty whispered in a worried voice,

"Look, Fyodor, look! Wake up."

Fyodor awoke from his fitful slumber and raised himself up on his elbow.

"Look out the middle window. Don't get up. Look out from where you are."

It was dark outside, and no shapes could yet be seen. Then, suddenly, a dot of light glowed and went out. A few moments later it glowed again. That meant someone was standing behind the tree, smoking.

"Who could it be?" Silanty whispered. "Demian doesn't smoke."

Fyodor felt a dull ache in his heart. This was not fear any longer, it was something he could not even name. If not for Anton, he was thinking, all the lights would be blazing soon. Perhaps, even now, there would be boisterous singing, drunken shouting and laughter, and drunken dishevelled, half-naked women would be lying around on the beds and stumbling around outside.

Father and son lay on their beds in the dark until dawn, with their eyes wide-open, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did.

That morning Fyodor said, "He's been there over two days. He doesn't have much food left. What'll we do?"

Before Silanty had a chance to reply, they heard the familiar sound of carriage wheels bumping over tree roots on the road.

Fyodor rushed over to the window. "It looks like the master and his friends."

It was indeed Kaftanov, but he was alone and unusually sober. Silanty and Fyodor dashed out to meet him. Fyodor grabbed the bridle. The old man wanted to take the reins, but Kaftanov flung them at his face, jumped down and suddenly brought his whip across Silanty's body full force.

"I'll show you how to hide convicts here, you bastard! Demian! Iniutin! Where's the police?"

The blow sent Silanty reeling. He fell on all fours.

A city gendarme popped out from behind the trees. He was small and round, and looked like an owl. He had on a blue regulation greatcoat and cap. Two other men were right behind him. All three had long swords suspended from their belts which got in their way when they ran. Hopping along on his peg leg, Iniutin brought up the rear.

"Well, you detectives? What's the matter? You've been watching the place for forty-eight hours! What's the matter, Sergeant Dorofeyev? Don't you have anything to report?"

"Why, Mikhail Lukich, we didn't notice anything suspicious around here," the man who looked like an owl replied. "It's really a puzzle. All the clues point to Anton Savelyev hiding out someplace in these parts."

"He was here, I tell you! Right here in this house! May my good leg go bum on me if he wasn't!" Iniutin shouted. "He's wounded, and this old skunk was brewing herbs for him. He said it was for his rheumatism, but the place stank of blood. I've been around hospitals long enough to know the smell of rotting wounds."

"What are you saying, Demian? Think of what you're saying!" Silanty cried. "There's no smell here. There was nobody wounded here! Is there no fear of God in you?"

"It was that convict whelp of yours!" Iniutin shouted, rushing at Silanty and looking as if he would trample him with his wooden leg. "Why were there three spoons on the table? Who was the third person eating with you? Who was hiding up in the hayloft? Why, the spoon was still hot! But the bastard managed to get him out of sight! Where'd you hide him? Where is he?" he screamed, swinging his peg leg.

"Take it easy," Kaftanov said listlessly. "We'll soon find out if he's hiding out around here. He can't run far if he's wounded. Unharness the horse and give him some oats. What're you cringing away in the corner for, Fyodor? Bring out something to eat. And a mugfull of home-brew for these fine sleuths. See how frozen they are? The nights are getting cold. Come on, Silanty, get

that oven going! ” He headed into the house and was followed by the gendarmes, whose cleated boots clattered up the porch steps.

Half an hour later they were all a bit drunk. There were large drops of perspiration on Dorofeyev's hooked nose.

“Savelyev escaped from the Tomsk prison,” he was saying. “They contacted us in Novonikolayevsk to be on the lookout for him, because he might be coming this way. And he did. But the bastard slipped through our fingers. He's real slippey. We nearly got him once, but he slipped away again. He had a broken arm, but he got away anyway. Then we got word from Shantara that he was seen here, so we came right down. We hunted around in the village, but couldn't find a trace of him. Then we thought we might catch him in Mikhailovka, since he might've gone home. But there was no sight of him there, either. That's when Demian came over to report about something suspicious going on here.”

“You've got sawdust in your heads,” Kaftanov said snickering into his beard. “And I don't know what Iniutin's got in his. He'd be glad to skin Silanty alive if he could. That's why he keeps imagining things. Why, wouldn't Fyodor come straight to me if his convict of a brother showed up here? It's not to his interest to hide him. As to where his interest lies, I have a feeling Fyodor's getting a good idea of that right from the start. He's a fine kid. He'll really be somebody when he grows up, if someone gives him a helping hand for a starter. And who can do that? Hm, Fyodor?”

“Who else except you, Mikhail Lukich?” Fyodor replied, setting two more bottles of home-brew on the table.

“That's right. Come on, boy, pull up a chair. From now on your place is next to me. On my left here. The right-hand place is for my son Zinovy, and that's only as it should be. In another year or two, when you get a little older, I'll introduce you to him. I want you two to be friends.”

Fyodor sat down beside Kaftanov.

“Don't be mad at these here detectives. They've no

sense. Wouldn't you have told me if your no-good brother showed up here? "

Silanty, who was in the process of shoving a pot of water deep into the brick oven, nearly dropped the oven prongs as his eyes went quickly to his son. But Fyodor did not even notice his father's quick glance.

"Sure, I would. Why shouldn't I? "

"Well, then, tell me," Kaftanov said in the same friendly voice.

"What d'you mean?" Fyodor said in a frightened voice.

"Don't you turn your head away! " Kaftanov suddenly bellowed and in a flash his huge hands were gripping Fyodor's neck. "You don't think you can outsmart me, sonny boy, do you? You're getting too big for your britches, that's what's the matter with you. Now let's have it: where's that jailbird brother of yours? "

"Fyodor! " his father cried out in appeal.

But it was not his father's voice, nor Silanty's terrified eyes that suddenly made Fyodor's blood boil. At that moment he was oblivious to everything. He tried to break out of the iron grip Kaftanov's sweaty hands had on his neck and screamed, "Take your paws off me, you bastard!"

"Wha-at? "

What Fyodor had said and the way in which he had said it were so unexpected that Kaftanov involuntarily loosened his grip. In that split second Fyodor broke away, although Kaftanov's clawing nails left bloody rips on his neck. He was at the door in two bounds.

"You old boar! " he shouted frenziedly, rubbed his neck and looked at his bloody hand. "Who do you think you are, anyway? "

Kaftanov lowered his head and snorted like an enraged bull. He snatched the whip off the wall. Fyodor dashed down the porch steps, darted behind the stable and from there he ran into the woods.

* * *

He lay in a distant ravine in the woods on a pile of dry leaves until darkness had fallen, going over everything that

had happened. Fyodor realized that this was the end of his association with Kaftanov. "It was a good life," he was thinking. "And it would've been still better in time. Things could've really worked out good. Anna would've grown up. What'll I do now? Why the devil did Anton have to come here? Why couldn't they have got him someplace else instead of hitting him in the arm?" He gritted his teeth, overcome by self-pity.

Suddenly, he felt hungry. "Where'll I go now? Back to the house? What if Kaftanov's still there? Maybe back home? But what if the gendarmes and Iniutin are waiting for me there? Maybe go to the cave? But Anton's all out of provisions himself, and he's hungry, too. Besides, maybe I'll just be leading them to him? Who knows? Maybe they're spying on me now. No, I can't go to the cave. They'll see I knew all about Anton then. Maybe things'll still blow over. Pa won't tell them even if they kill him. And then, Anton'll move on soon, and everybody'll forget all about him. Nobody ever saw him here. No, it won't blow over now. I should've kept my temper. But I called him a bastard and an old boar. After all, he wasn't going to choke me to death." Fyodor hated himself.

He stayed in his hideout for a while longer and then decided to go home to Mikhailovka.

The cold, distant stars twinkled overhead among the treetops. Every now and then a gust of wind would make the shaggy pines and bare birches sway. The sounds of the forest were frightening, menacing, but Fyodor was not afraid of sounds, nor of coming upon some wild beast in the dark. Such a possibility did not enter his mind, for his thoughts were elsewhere. "Why didn't I keep my temper? Why'd I say that? It all would've blown over sooner or later."

Fyodor reached the village shortly before dawn, making his way along the back gardens to his family's garden. He dropped to the ground by the old wattle fence, listening to every sound. A dead silence reigned. He imagined that in the several months he had been away the village had become deserted, that perhaps some plague had carried off every inhabitant and dog, all the cattle and every living creature.

But no, the cocks had not died out. Far away, at the other end of the village, a cock crowed, making Fyodor jump. Then a second one crowed, and a third. For the next five minutes cocks crowed everywhere. Then the sounds ended as abruptly as the crowing had begun.

At the first ray of light a door creaked. Fyodor knew the sound. He pressed closer to the ground, ready, at a moment's notice, to jump up, sail over the fence and, racing along the back gardens, to return to the woods. Someone came out of the house and was walking towards the woodshed. Peering intently into the gloom, Fyodor recognized his mother and rose swiftly.

"Ma! "

"Goodness! Who's there? "

"It's me."

"My dear! My boy! " His mother hurried to him. Her work-hardened fingers caressed his head. "They took Pa away yesterday. It was those gendarmes. They took him to Shantara. Where's Anton? How is he? Is his arm any better? "

"Shh! There's nobody here, is there? "

"Of course not. Just me and Ivan. He was bawling his head off when they took Pa away yesterday. Demian Iniutin harnessed up the best carriage, that's how happy he was. The whole village was as mad as a hornet's nest. They went along with Pa nearly as far as Zvenigora. What's going to happen now, Fyodor? Did Anton get away in time? They say the gendarmes couldn't find him there."

"Yes, he got away. Pa and me have him hidden away in a cave in Zvenigora, but he hasn't had anything to eat for two days."

"Oh! "

"Be quiet! I haven't had anything, either. I'm starved. Are you sure the gendarmes are gone? "

"Yes. Demian drove them all away and came back in an empty carriage."

"Is Kaftanov here? I mean, in the village? "

"I haven't seen him. God knows where he is."

As Fyodor sat at the table he could feel his eyelids drooping. He was even too tired to eat. He chewed on a

piece of bread, but pushed away the bowl of boiled potatoes.

"I'm too sleepy, Ma. I haven't slept for two whole nights."

"Do you think you're strong enough to take Anton something now?" Ustinya said hesitantly.

"He won't die if he waits till the evening."

"Maybe he'd better move on? Go still farther away? Maybe there's some better place he can hide. You tell him what happened."

"There's no better place. He's in the Snake Gorge."

"Oh, my God! You and Pa must've been out of your minds!" She turned as pale as ghost. "The rattlesnakes'll tear him to pieces."

"No, they won't, Ma." The voice came from a far, dark corner where ten-year-old Ivan slept under a pile of rags. "We went there last year. Fyodor and me. Boy, was I scared! That's 'cause I didn't know those poison snakes all go to sleep soon's it gets cold."

"What do you mean you went there?" she gasped.

"Right into the gorge." Ivan sat up in bed, yawned and rubbed his eyes with his fists. "There's a real big hole there, Ma, just like a big sack made out of rocks. Fyodor took me."

"You little squirt! You think I took you there so's you could tattle?"

"What're you so mad about? All I said was they wouldn't bite him. And you've got to hide there, too, now. You know what Kirian Iniutin said to me yesterday? He said, 'Your Pa's been arrested, and your brother Fyodor's going to be arrested just as soon as they catch him.'"

"Wait a minute." Fyodor went over to his brother, squatted beside him and said, "What else did he say?"

"He said, 'Your Pa and Fyodor are going to be tortured till they confess where they hid Anton.' He said they'll boil a big pot of water and stick your hands and feet in it."

"Shut up! Don't you dare listen to such nonsense! Who ever heard of people being boiled alive?" his mother said.

"It wasn't me. I'm just telling you what he said. And

then fat Anfisa next door started bawling. That's 'cause she got so scared. But I didn't, 'cause I didn't believe him. Not till they took Pa away. What if they do boil him? Huh, Fyodor? "

"It's a pack of lies."

"I know. Anfisa said Kirian was lying, too. That was after they arrested Pa. And then she said, 'If Fyodor shows up, don't you dare tell Kirian.'"

"Why not? " Fyodor demanded.

" 'Cause Kirian's pa told him to keep an eye out for you and tell him the minute you showed up. That's why he was hanging around here all day yesterday. And he kept asking me if you were back yet."

"What'd you say? "

"Well, you weren't here, were you? That's what I said."

"But what if I was? What would you've done then? Would you've told him? "

"Sure. I would've run as fast as I could to tell on you. I'd even have taken my shoes off to run faster." His high-pitched voice trembled from childish rage. "I hate that freckle-faced rat. You should've seen him showing off his store shoes. His pa bought them in Shantara. They're as black as tar, and there's a design down the front, and the soles are tan." Ivan fell silent as he thought over something and then continued, "The tips have a design all over, but they're as hard as iron. We were playing hide-and-seek, and me and Anfisa were hiding behind the barn. And Anna Kaftanova was, too. He was 'it', and he found us, and he kicked me in the behind with his new shoe. And he said, 'Don't you hide with Anfisa.' That lousy rat. Can I go with you when you go to take something to Anton? Or I can go by myself. I know where the cave is. And you can sleep, meanwhile."

"That's what you think! " Fyodor said, straightening up. "Some of the snakes haven't gone to sleep yet. And be sure you don't tell a soul I'm here."

"I'm not that dumb! "

Fyodor went to sleep in the attic until nightfall. The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was a tiny ray of light coming through a hole in the roof. Dust particles

in great profusion danced within the tiny beam.

"It's evening," he said to himself. He had often watched this little beam and knew its course as day progressed into evening.

It was stuffy and dusty in the attic which smelled of dried birch twigs that hung from the rafters in tight bunches, stored here for use in the bathhouse.

Fyodor listened intently but could not hear a sound downstairs. Some children were playing mumbly-peg outside. He heard his brother's voice. "That bastard Kirian will give him a good swift kick in the pants again if he loses. Just listen to him holler."

Rage welled up inside of him. "Just listen to that bastard! I'll twist your nose off together with your head if you lay a finger on Ivan. That'll really make you holler!" he was thinking. Then he recalled Kaftanov's huge hands choking him the previous morning. "You filthy old boar!" The blood pounded in his head so hard it made it ache, while rage and misery engulfed him. "That's all you want to do to us: kick us in the pants and choke us. It's got to be a regular habit. That's how you've always had it. I can hardly move my neck. It's all clawed to pieces. If he'd have got his nails in any deeper, he'd have torn my windpipe. Just you wait. I'll get even with you some day." Fyodor touched his neck gingerly. The scratches had dried and scabs had formed, but one had apparently been torn off in his sleep, and the moment his fingers touched the spot it began to sting, which only served to further enrage him. "You hairy old ape! Look at what you've done to me! Wait till I get my hands on your fat neck! It'll be worse than this. So you want to know where Anton is, do you? I'd like to see you find him. You'd better keep your mouths hanging open so's you won't miss him."

The spark of rage which had flared up quite by chance (if he had not heard the boys shouting it might never have) touched off a great fire. Fyodor no longer recalled that but a short while before he had envied Kaftanov's wild life, and that all sorts of plans were stirring within him, exciting him, so that he was ready to serve Kaftanov, who had promised to set him up in life. Now, however, the affront he had suffered and his rage swept all this away. Never

before had he suspected he was capable of such emotions. "I've got to get to Anton quickly. I've got to warn him about finding another hiding place. I should've gone straight to him this morning. It wouldn't have killed me to stay up a bit longer. I don't believe those lies about boiling water, but what if they really beat it out of Pa? It sure will be a holiday for Kaftanov if they catch Anton. I can just see his hairy mouth grinning. Oh, no! You've got another thought coming." He climbed down quickly. Hearing his steps in the pantry, Ustinya rushed out of the house.

"Is it you? I thought.... Oh, Lord. I'll slip the bolt."

"Shh, Ma. Why'd you let Ivan out? "

"Demian Iniutin's boy must've come in half a dozen times, calling him outside to play. 'What're you sitting home for? Are you sick or something?' he kept saying, and his eyes kept shifting back and forth. So I told Ivan to go out and play, so's it wouldn't seem funny. Don't you worry. Ivan's a smart little fellow. He won't say a word."

"All right. Get some food ready for Anton. I'm going to see him now."

"Fyodor! "

"Don't worry. I'll go along the back gardens, and then into the bushes and down along the ravines."

A short while later Fyodor slipped across the garden, over the fence and into a patch of tall, wild grass, pressing a loaf of bread and chunk of fatback tied up in a cloth to his side. He lay in the grass for a while and then, darting from one deserted lane to another, made his way out of the village.

Everything seemed well, for no one had noticed him. He followed a shallow, grassy ravine nearly as far as the Gromotukha and then turned to walk along the bank towards Zvenigora, chewing on a chunk of bread and glancing over his shoulder from time to time.

On two or three occasions he noticed a few people behind him or off to a side, but they were very far away and did not worry him. Anyone might have been out in the steppe.

He began to worry as he approached Zvenigora and the gorge, for looking back he saw a man on a horse. "It's Demian Iniutin!" The realization petrified him. The rider was advancing in the shadow of the cliff, which concealed his face, but Fyodor had keen eyes and he made out the rider's wooden leg.

He panicked and ran instead of walking on past Zvenigora. He might have thought of something to say about where he was going and why then, but by breaking into a run he gave himself away. Iniutin whooped and overtook him, nearly trampling him at the very entrance to the gorge which he blocked with his horse. Then he slid out of the saddle and blew his nose loudly.

"You filthy heathen," he said amiably, having cleared both of his large nostrils. "I knew all about you coming home last night. Your ma was scurrying around the house like a mouse. It was written all over her face. What I wanted to know was whether your jailbird had flown the coop or whether you'd got him holed up someplace. If he'd flown, there'd be no sense in us trying to catch him. But if he was hiding out, you'd be sure to take him some food sooner or later." Iniutin snatched Fyodor's bundle and began untying it.

Dorofeyev came running up. He was out of breath. Sweat streamed down his face. He pulled off his cap to reveal a head of wet hair that was actually steaming.

"What do you want?" Fyodor said as he finally came to his senses and spun around.

"Don't you try any monkey-business, boy," Dorofeyev replied and opened his holster. "This thing'll catch up with you anyway."

"What are you pestering me for? I'm going to Shantara to see what they've done to my pa."

"Whew!" Dorofeyev sank down on a rock by the road. "You've given us a hard time, Iniutin, with all your sleuthing. I'll bet you anything the convict's a hundred miles from here."

"He's here, my friend, someplace right in this mountain," Iniutin replied, sniffing at the chunk of old fatback. "If they'd have hidden him away in the taiga, this little bastard would've gone there. But he came this way. And

there's no place to hide here except on Zvenigora."

The other gendarmes also sat down. Their round knees stretched the blue cloth of their uniform trousers. They looked creased and dirty, and it was obvious that they had not had any sleep for a long time. Fyodor smiled viciously at the sight of them.

"What's he got there? Fatback?" one of the gendarmes asked. "Is it all right if we call a halt for a bite, sir?"

"Go ahead."

Iniutin tossed them the loaf, then the fatback. One of the men pulled out his sword, placed the fatback on the loaf and began slicing it thinly and skillfully. This was something he was used to doing.

For several minutes after that the gendarmes chewed loudly, while Iniutin and Dorofeyev waited.

"Well, what is it we've tracked down, Iniutin?" Dorofeyev asked after a while. "I can't see the sense of this. That old geezer didn't tell us anything, and I can see by the look in his eye that this little rat won't, either."

"Oh, yes, he will," Iniutin said, smiling craftily into his stringy beard. There was something so evil in his smile and the icy glitter of his moist eyes that an uneasy ache stirred inside Fyodor's chest. "He'll tell us, if he wants to live. And if he doesn't, we'll chop him up with our swords and toss the pieces into Snake Gorge. No one'll ever think to look for him there. Give me your sword. I'll just tickle him with it for a starter." He held his hand out towards the gendarme who was slicing the fatback and then turned back to Fyodor to say, "What're you so scared about, sonny boy? There's no reason for it. We'll just slice you up in little pieces like he's sliced the fat, and that's all. We won't do anything else."

"He will. He will, too!" The words pounded inside Fyodor's head. He kept backing away from Iniutin towards the cliff that hung over the road, while Demian, limping slowly and no longer smiling, advanced, holding the sword out in front of him like a spear.

The very moment that Fyodor felt his back press flat against the side of the cliff the sharp, hot tip of the sword pricked his chest. His one and only thought was to shove

aside the long steel stinger or snatch it away and slash at Iniutin's cruel and glittering eyes. His hands jerked involuntarily.

"Leave off!" Iniutin's hoarse voice exploded in his ears. "It'll cut your fingers off, and they'll drop like sliced beans. Tell me where that stinking revolutionary is. Where'd you hide him?"

Fyodor's hands dropped limply to his sides. He sensed that the tip of the sword had cut through his shirt and his skin, too, and was now stuck against a rib, because a hot trickle was running down his chest and stomach.

"Why doesn't someone come along the road, a wagon or something, so they'd see what they're doing to me?" Fyodor was thinking feverishly. He even imagined he could hear the sound of wagon wheels clattering nearby. He glanced quickly at the road and saw that it was deserted, save for Dorofeyev and the two gendarmes. The sound of the wheels had vanished. The gendarmes sat chewing the last of the fatback slowly, paying no attention to Fyodor and Iniutin. Then one of them wiped his hands on the inside of his greatcoat. Farther on, beyond the gendarmes and Dorofeyev, was the Gromotukha. The opposite bank was full of sunshine, and the water near the bank seemed covered with golden sunflowers.

All this was imprinted upon Fyodor's mind in an instant. Then, for some reason or other, his memory produced another scene: Lusha Kashkarova, and not actually Lusha, but her bare breasts and the scent of her body, and he thought he could hear her calling softly, "Fyodor ... Fyodor.... What're you scared of, silly?" Then Lusha disappeared. Instead, he imagined the naked women dashing out of the bathhouse and plunging into the lake, laughing shrilly. Another voice then came to him. It was low-pitched and hoarse: "I can set you up in life if you'll serve me faithfully. I've got to find somebody to take Demian's place some day. I've got my eye on you."

"What're you holding the sword with the edge down like that?" Dorofeyev's shout blocked out the hoarse voice. "Hold it flat, and it'll slide in between his ribs easily."

Fyodor felt the hot steel cutting the skin of his chest and digging in between his ribs.

"I'm giving you one last chance. Where's Anton hiding?" The question rang in his ears.

Fyodor would probably have told him, he would have probably broken down and told him, but at that very moment someone said,

"Here I am. Leave the boy alone, you bastard! "

Fyodor sighed and collapsed in a heap. He heard shouts and exclamations, feet pounding and iron clanging. When he raised his head he saw Anton. He was covered with soot from the campfire and had become very thin. He stood there with his hands behind his back.

"It's not my fault, Anton," Fyodor said, getting up from the ground. "It's not my fault. I was bringing you some bread, and they tailed me. They tailed me here. But I didn't tell them anything. You know I didn't."

"Yes, I know. And thanks," he said sadly as a frown creased his forehead. "Never mind, Fyodor. It's just the way things turned out. And tell Pa I'm grateful for everything he did."

"Come on, get a move on you!" Dorofeyev said, jabbing Anton's shoulder. "We've got to hurry. It'll be dark soon."

Anton backed away from the jab and nearly fell. When his back was turned Fyodor saw that he was not simply holding his hands behind him. Anton was handcuffed.

"So that's it! They've got him in irons! So that's what they look like." His heart was racing so he might have been handcuffed himself.

"What are you doing? He's got a bad arm! His arm...." Fyodor ran over to Anton, as if he could somehow remove the handcuffs.

"Shut up! " one of the gendarmes said, shoving him aside. "You've done your job. Now shut up."

The shove sent Fyodor flying. He tripped over a root, fell, hitting his head against the roadbed, and lost consciousness.

* * *

Everyone in the house, save Semyon, perhaps, was flabbergasted by what Andrei had done. No one had

noticed him preparing to run away to the front lines. When a frightened Dima had come running home from school with Andrei's note for his mother, Anna at first could not understand what had happened, and when she did she gasped and began to wail.

While running to the station to search for him, Dima bumped into Kolya Iniutin, who was on his way home from school. His dirty, dog-eared schoolbooks were stuck into the top of his trousers and held in place by his belt. He was carrying a small plywood box.

"I've got a rat in here!" he said, shaking the box in Dima's face. "It's got a tail as long as a snake's. I traded it for my slingshot and two clean notebooks. I'm going to let it out during the German class tomorrow. That old bitch gave me a 'D' yesterday when I said I wasn't going to study that lousy nazi language. Boy, I can't wait to hear her screech!"

"Andrei's run away to join the army!" Dima shouted.

"Wha-a-at? Where're you going?"

"To the station! To see if I can find him. Maybe he's still there someplace."

"Wait! I'm going with you! Just wait'll I take my rat home."

Bounding into the house, Kolya stuck the box with the rat into a secret hiding place in the cold pantry, went inside, tossed his books onto the table, told his sister Vera the amazing news and dashed out to catch up with Dima. Vera hesitated, then put on her kerchief and ran after him.

Dima and Kolya caught sight of Semyon as he was driving away from the station. They waved frantically for him to stop his tractor. Sensing trouble, he jumped down. When they told him what had happened, his knees nearly buckled, and he sat down on the caterpillar track.

"Oh. I should have my head examined. I heard him talking about trains a couple of days ago. How come we didn't notice him getting ready to run away? How come you didn't notice?"

"Ha! You know how sneaky he is?" the boys said, speaking practically in unison.

Semyon left his tractor by the roadside and ran back to the station.

They might have spared themselves the trouble, for at that very moment Andrei was far away, stretched out on his back on the bottom of a flatcar between some wooden crates and listening to the loud clatter of the wheels as he gazed up at the darkening sky and wondered how soon they would reach Novosibirsk.

Andrei's main difficulty lay in the fact that he did not know where the train would be going from there: towards the front lines or in the opposite direction. He had been too agitated to ask anyone in Shantara for the information, but he knew that the train had to pass through Novosibirsk and that was why he was not really worried. Once there, he would be sure to find a train going to the front lines. He had plotted it all out beforehand, having gone over every detail carefully, time and again. He felt his plan was foolproof. The main thing was to stay awake and not to miss Novosibirsk.

He had on the pair of good, sturdy boots that were nearly new, a warm fur hat and a heavy jacket. Tucked away in the sack he used for a pillow were three loaves of bread, a chunk of fatback, a few carrots, two onions, some salt wrapped up in a piece of cloth, a box of matches, a spoon, a tin mug and the little pail he took along when he went fishing. There were also some odds and ends he would need on the journey for which he had prepared so long in advance and so carefully. He had dressed warmly, knowing that it would be a long trip and that the nights were cold. Besides, winter might be upon him before he reached his destination. Still and all, he had felt that ten days were about all it would take by train. Then, after he had joined some army unit, he would be issued a uniform and everything else a Red Army soldier was supposed to have.

His was a three-part plan. Part one: getting to Novosibirsk. Part two: getting to Moscow from Novosibirsk. These two stages were a cinch. As for the third part, getting to the front lines from Moscow, this was a bit more complicated. According to the newspapers and the radio, the front lines passed near Moscow, but he did not know whether there were any trains running straight up to the front lines.

However, even this did not worry him too much. Since the front lines were someplace near Moscow, he could, if there were no other way out, reach it on foot from Moscow.

Thus, everything was clear, simple, and easily attainable. Kolya Iniutin, that stupid fool, had gone to the draft board. What did those people know? Now take him, for instance. He had simply hopped a train and was already on his way. And he'd get there! Boy, would Kolya ever be surprised when he found out! Maybe being envious would put some sense into his head and he'd follow Andrei's example.

The only person he felt badly about was his mother. Pa would naturally roll his eyes and sputter like a locomotive, and shout. Well, he could shout all he wanted to. He wouldn't catch him now. But Ma ... she'd get all upset and cry. However, when he returned home after the war in his Red Army uniform, looking weatherbeaten and smelling of gunpowder, and perhaps even carrying a real sword like Chapayev had, things would be different. What was to stop them from presenting him with an engraved sword if he did something very special, very brave? It would be nice to have some sort of medal, too. He might get one at that. Boy, would everybody's eyes pop when he came back with a real sword and a medal, and a uniform! Dima would be so envious his face would get covered with red splotches. Kolya Iniutin's hooked nose would twitch, and his eyes would blaze. Semyon would gape. But Ma would be so happy and proud of him that she'd just smile and smile, and be a bit embarrassed, and her eyes would shine. And what about Pa? And Kolya's sister Vera? And that long-legged Ganka who'd moved in with them? And the kids in his class?

The sky was becoming darker. The wheels clattered, and as Andrei gazed up at the first stars he began thinking that maybe one evening his father ... or, no, perhaps Semyon would come home after work, open up the paper and gasp, for there would be a picture of Andrei in it! He wouldn't have his sword yet, but he'd be wearing a Red Army uniform, and Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin would be standing beside him, holding the box with his medal in it

in his left hand, shaking his hand and smiling, and Stalin would be there, smiling and looking at him, too. "Pa! Ma! " Semyon would shout. "Look at this! " The only part that bothered him was that he'd not be there to see their faces.

Lulled by the monotonous clatter of the wheels and his sweet daydreams, he closed his eyes and fell asleep. He slept soundly, smiling in his sleep, to be awakened by the shrill sound of engine whistles.

Andrei rubbed his eyes. The wheels were not clattering. The train was not moving. He crawled to the edge of the flatcar, leaned over the low wooden side and looked right and left, but all he could see in the gloom was a long line of freightcars. He rushed to the other side of the car, and again he saw nothing but freightcars. Then he climbed up on a crate for a better view. He was standing in the middle of a sea of freightcars. The entire area was dimly lit by rare searchlights attached to high posts. Locomotives steamed everywhere, and the white steam was clearly visible in the gloom, rising in columns. The columns seemed to be supporting the low, black sky, keeping the black night from crashing down upon the earth.

To the right, beyond the steam rising over the locomotives and the sea of humped freightcars, was a huge, two- or three-story building bathed in the bright beams of searchlights. Andrei's keen eyes picked out the passenger trains. He realized the building was a station house. "This is Novosibirsk! " he decided, snatched up his bag and got off the train.

He darted under brake platforms, realizing full well that at any moment any one of the trains might start moving, bruised his knees and head and dragged his sack behind him.

Andrei came upon a woman carrying a lantern. She was dressed in grease-spotted quilted pants and a jacket and carried a long-handled hammer. She would shine the lantern on a wheel and then tap it with her hammer.

"Is this Novosibirsk? " he asked, just to make sure.

"Yes. What are you doing here?" She raised her lantern. He glimpsed the candle stub burning behind the yellow pane of glass. "Were you stealing coal from the trains? "

"No. I just got here."

"You mean you're a refugee? "

"Yes."

"Go on to the station. That's where everybody else is getting out. You've no business here. Go on, run along! " She continued on her way, tapping the wheels with her hammer.

"Wait a minute! Which way is Moscow? "

"What? Why do you want to know? "

"It's important."

"Wait a minute, sonny," she said and walked towards him.

He ducked under one train, then under another and a third, and hopped into a flatcar loaded with lumber. There he pressed against the side. His heart pounded. "That was a close shave! Sure, she guessed right away, because the front lines are real close to Moscow. I'd better not ask any more questions around here."

After a while, realizing that no one was chasing him, he calmed down and decided to think things over. He had completed the first part of his plan with flying colors. It was now time for him to embark upon the second stage.

Feeling hungry, he untied his sack, broke off a chunk of bread and took out a carrot. For some reason or other, both the bread and the carrot smelled of kerosene. It took him a few moments to see that the smell was actually coming from his hands, which were full of axle grease from climbing under the trains.

He felt quite cozy. A low wooden rail shielded him on one side, while on the other there were heavy logs. The ends of the third layer of logs extended over the two lower ones, forming a little niche. Andrei climbed into it, stretched out and felt very pleased. Now he could ride all the way to Moscow in this little house. All he needed was some straw for a mattress which he could get from the next car, since bales of hay were stacked on it. No one would notice him at any of the stops along the way. He would be well-hidden from sight. The only question now was: which way was the train going?

Andrei did not feel like crawling out of his niche, and so he lay there, going over the facts in his mind. His car

was carrying lumber; the next was piled high with bales of hay; farther on there were gasoline tanks. Where could all that be going? To the front, naturally. The lumber was for building pillboxes, the hay was for the cavalry horses and the gasoline was for the planes.

It seemed correct, but what if the train's destination was not Moscow, after all? He would have to find out in which direction the capital lay.

According to his plan, this would be as easy as pie. He would go to the station and see which way the trains that had plaques with the words "Vladivostok-Moscow", "Irkutsk-Moscow" or "Novosibirsk-Moscow" on their sides were moving. After that he would hop a freight starting up in that direction.

Andrei climbed out of his niche reluctantly. Dawn was turning the black sky gray, and the smoke rising from the engine stacks seemed to drift higher. He jumped down and made his way over and under the trains, heading towards the station.

As he approached a train rumbled by. The locomotive appeared unexpectedly, as if materializing from thin air, and the whistle blasted, making Andrei freeze in his tracks. The engine was bearing down on him, becoming bigger and bigger by the moment. He could see its flat black front, the red grill above the front wheels that looked like a horrible grin and the short, funnel-like stack belching black smoke. He knew that in another instant he would be squashed like a fly, but could not move his paralyzed legs.

He could not recall having darted out of the train's path. He felt a blast of hot air and saw the sooty-faced engineer shake his fist at him as his eyes flashed by.

Andrei looked after the disappearing cab and hung his head in shame. It was a very long freight. The cars kept clattering and clattering by. However, the moment he raised his head he forgot about the engineer and his terrible fright. He was looking at tanks! Real tanks! Now tanks were something that would never be moving away from the front lines. That could only mean they were going towards Moscow, where the fighting was. Now he knew another way to tell in which direction the front lines lay. How stupid of him not to have thought of it and to

have relied on the plaques on passenger trains! What a stupid fool he was!

He nearly did a jig from joy. Then he hurried back, climbing over and under the brake platforms again.

"I've got to find the one with the logs. It shouldn't be hard. There was hay in the next car and gasoline tanks in the one after. If the train starts moving in the opposite direction than the one with the tanks, I can hop right off it and find another, but if it's going the same way I'll really be lucky. I'll be safe and sound in my little house, and the rain won't get at me. But where is it? What if it's gone? What if it's gone?"

It was bright morning when he finally stumbled upon it. He climbed into his house, stretched out and smiled blissfully.

The train did not move for perhaps an hour or two. Andrei waited patiently. At last he heard a loud metallic clang. It was getting louder and closer. Then, suddenly, the car he was in shuddered and moved. The clanging became fainter as it passed on to the other end of the train. Now the wheels began to move, clattering every now and then on the rail joints.

Andrei climbed out of his niche and looked around. He laughed with relief, for he was moving in the same direction as the train with the tanks had.

A few minutes later the train passed the signal lights and began gaining speed. The last of the station outbuildings flashed by. A church floated off, and rows of small, wooden, weather-beaten houses began moving backward, faster and faster. Suddenly, the train thundered over a huge railroad bridge.

Andrei had never seen such a large bridge or such a broad river before. It must have been at least five times as wide as the Gromotukha. There was even a boat on it. He looked down through the flashing iron girders at the large white boat trailing a foaming white strip, at the heavy, lead-colored waves falling away from its sides and felt very thirsty.

"What a dope I am! I should've got some water at the station. I will the minute the train stops."

Soon the bridge, the river, the boat and the city were

all left behind as the train speeded on through the steppe. Every now and then a village would flash by in the distance, but Andrei soon was tired of looking at them and cautiously made his way over to the next flatcar and the bales of hay. They were stacked in a pyramid, and each one was tightly bound with baling wire. He tried to pull some loose hay out but could not. Then he inspected all the bales, in constant danger of falling off the car, hoping to find at least one that was loose but could not, and so, he returned to his niche, telling himself that he could manage without a mattress, after all.

Andrei kept getting thirstier and thirstier. His mouth was parched. His tongue felt furry. The monotonous clattering of the wheels made him drowsy, but he could not sleep, either. No sooner would he close his eyes than he would visualize the white boat cutting through the leaden waves with its blunt prow, and this only made him still more thirsty.

As ill luck would have it, the train kept crossing a series of streams and small rivers. Even though they were small, Andrei was sure that there was enough water in them for a hundred, or two hundred, or even a thousand people to drink their fill. If only the train would stop near a stream!

However, it did not. For the next several hours it made no stops at all. The sun was now higher in the sky, shining down upon the bleak, deserted fields from which the grain had long since been harvested and where the low stubble had been trampled by cattle. When Andrei felt that he would not be able to stand the burning sensation in his mouth and throat any longer, the train finally began to slow down. He leaned over the side, but was not too pleased at the sight that met his eyes: up ahead was a semaphore and behind it was a low wooden barracks-type building. Could this be a spur line? "If it was a regular station they'd have a tap with boiling water, and I could've gotten a pailfull. But I don't know what's in that building. If there are people there, they're sure to have water, but I can't take a chance. They'll want to know who I am, and why I'm riding a freight. No, I can't take a chance. And anyway, I don't even know if the train's going to stop here."

It finally did. The car in which Andrei was came to a halt opposite the barracks.

There, beside it, and Andrei shut his eyes tight for a moment and shook his head, fearful lest he was imagining things, was a well and a woman, no, it seemed like a girl, pulling up a wooden bucket and pouring water from it into two pails.

Should he ask her for a pailfull of water? It was a risk! But maybe he would, after all. Maybe she wouldn't guess where he was going. No, it was too dangerous. Even if the girl didn't ask any questions, she'd surely tell her folks about him. And they, being grown-up, would either pull him right off the train or phone (there was surely a telephone in the barracks!) the nearest station to report him.

However, the stream of crystal-clear, cold water pouring from the heavy wooden bucket into the tin pails glittered and sparkled. He could actually feel the taste of it. The muscles of his throat contracted. He looked ahead. The semaphore still shone red. Without giving himself an account of what he was doing, his hands untied his sack and pulled out his little pail. He threw off his jacket and jumped down, shouting,

"Hey! Wait a sec! "

The girl looked up.

"Pour me some water! Hurry! " he shouted, running up to her. Paying no attention to the girl who had backed away in fright, he scooped up some water from one of the tin pails. Then, spilling some, he began to drink greedily. The water was ice-cold, so that after the first two or three gulps his teeth began to ache and tears sprang to his eyes.

"Who are you? "

"Somebody," he replied, pressing his hand to his cheek to relieve the ache in his teeth. Then he began drinking again.

The girl stared at him. "Are you a stowaway? "

"I'm no stowaway. I'm a boyaway."

She giggled.

"Don't tell anyone you saw me. Promise? "

"All right. You can take some water if you want to, but don't dip your pail into my pail again. Let me pour

you some." As she began to pour, the engine whistled and the train began to move. "Hurry! You'll be left behind! "

Andrei ran towards the train, splashing water as he did. The flatcar loaded with logs, the one where he had left his sack of provisions, was getting farther and farther away. "I can't catch up! I can't! But my bread's there. And the fatback. And my jacket. What'll I do? Oh, what'll I do? " Fear and helplessness turned his legs to putty. The tracks had been laid on a small embankment, which made running hard. "I can't catch up! "

Meanwhile, gasoline tanks, covered freightcars and more gasoline tanks were rolling by as the train gathered speed. Realizing that he would never catch up with his own flatcar, he dropped his pail and, risking being run over, tried to latch onto the car closest to him. But he lost his grip and rolled down the embankment, skinning his knee. Unmindful of the pain, he jumped up again. The last car was coasting by.

"Give me your hand, kid! Give me your hand! " he heard someone shout and glimpsed a man with a moustache leaning over the brake platform of the last car. The man was standing on the bottom step, gripping the handrail with one hand and holding out the other to him.

Andrei wanted to grab the proffered hand, but his palm only grazed the man's sleeve. The last car was moving away, half a meter, a meter, a meter and a half....

"Help me! " he screamed.

"Come on, boy! Run faster! Just one spurt! One last spurt! "

Andrei sensed that his food and jacket would be gone forever, and that he would never make it without them, so he tried one last time and made it.

"Hang on! Hang on to it! "

Something hit his face. He did not know what it was, but a sixth sense told him it was a rope, or a strap, and his hands clutched it so tenaciously nothing in the world could have made him uncurl his fingers.

The trainman pulled him up onto the brake platform. Andrei still clutched his end of the strap in his white-knuckled fists. Bushes were flashing by. The wheels clattered. Now, at last, he understood that he was on the train

and laughed with relief.

"It was just like pulling up a fish from a pond," the man said, squatting down before him. Then he winked and added, "You sure have an iron grip. Good for you."

"I'd never have made it if you hadn't helped me," Andrei said and stood up on wobbly legs. His chest ached as though someone had whacked him with a stick. He felt thirsty again.

"I left my food and my jacket on the car where the logs are."

"I was afraid you'd be left behind, too. Didn't you hear me shout and tell you to hurry when you ran off for water?"

"No." Andrei shook his head and looked at the strange man in wonder. "Who are you?"

"I'm the conductor. I travel back and forth on trains. Well, all's well that ends well. Don't worry about your things. You can get them at the next station. You want to go back to your own car, or travel on with me? I'd be glad to have you, because it's lonely travelling alone."

"I don't know." Andrei glanced at the man with the moustache doubtfully, trying to size up the situation. Even though he seemed like a kind person—and hadn't he tossed him the strap?—what if he handed him over to the militia at the very next station?

So far, nothing seemed to indicate that he would. The conductor was leaning on the railing of the brake platform, shelling some sunflower seeds and spitting the shells on the tracks that were snaking out from under the car. Perhaps he was a very good man. There were kind people who liked children and always gave them a helping hand. Maybe he'd understand and help him reach the front lines. However, just in case, Andrei wouldn't tell him his plans. Actually, his safest bet was to escape from the man altogether. But how was he to get his things?

The conductor stopped shelling seeds, took a raincoat off a hook, spread it on the floor, sat down, set his tin lunchbox on his lap and took out some tomatoes, hard-boiled eggs and bread.

"Sit down, Vasily Ivanovich, and let's have a bite to brighten the journey."

"I'm not Vasily Ivanovich. My name's Andrei Savelyev."

"Ah, I see. And mine's Nikolai Petrovich. Wait a sec! Did you say Andrei Savelyev?" He was about to slice the bread but suddenly seemed to have forgotten all about it. The knife was suspended in the air as he stared at Andrei. "You aren't Zinaida Savelyeva's son by any chance, are you? Isn't your mother the ticket clerk at the station in Novosibirsk?"

"No."

"Don't you try to fool me!" The conductor suddenly looked at him sternly. "I'm positive it's you. It's no use lying! Didn't you get into my garden this summer and ruin a whole row of tomato plants?"

"No! I was never even near your garden and your tomatoes! I'm not from Novosibirsk, anyway. I'm from Shantara. That's where I'm from."

"Oh." The man's eyes became kindly again. "I guess I must've made a mistake. I know Shantara. I've passed through many a time. There's a river there, isn't there? It's a very pretty river."

"You mean the Gromotukha?"

"Right. And as you ride in you see a big mountain."

"That's Zvenigora. It's a very nice mountain."

"Yes, it is. Now I believe you really are from Shantara. How could I've made such a mistake? I'm sorry."

"That's all right."

"Go on, don't be shy. Have something to eat."

"I'd rather have a drink of water."

"Here's my flask. Have as much as you want."

The wheels clattered rapidly, happily, as the train thundered past bare birch groves. Having drunk his fill, Andrei wolfed down some tomatoes and started on the eggs. Still and all, he felt uneasy. He vaguely sensed that he had somehow made a mistake in what he had told the conductor, but could not yet understand what it was.

After they had eaten, Nikolai Petrovich put the remains of the bread and the tomatoes back into his lunch-box, lit a cigarette and said, "I always liked going to Shantara. You keep passing forests and valleys, and hills. It's not at all like you see here now, nothing but bare steppe

and these dreary birch groves. Where are you going? To the front? "

Andrei had anticipated the question and had a ready answer, but when it was finally addressed to him it took him on unawares.

"Me? 'Course not. I'm going to visit my grandma. She lives near here. I'll be getting off soon."

"What's the name of the place?"

"Uh ... It's the first big station we come to. That's the one."

Nikolai Petrovich laughed and pulled Andrei's cap down onto his eyes.

"Hey! "

"You're a great liar. I can see you're going to the front. You don't have to lie to me. You can get off wherever you want to. If you're going to the front, though, I'd suggest you stay on this train, because that's where it's going."

"It is? That's just what I thought! After all, where'd they be taking gasoline now? Only to the front." Andrei bit his tongue, realizing he had given himself away completely.

"You're right. You have good head on your shoulders. I can see you're a brave little fellow. A fine boy. I'm only going as far as Chulymysk Station. Then another conductor'll take over. He's a good friend of mine. I'll ask him to let you stay on here, and then he'll ask the next man, and that one'll ask the one after till they get you right to the front. How about it? "

Andrei was in a dilemma. If he agreed, it meant confessing all. He said nothing.

"It's up to you. It's not as windy here, and it'll give you a roof over your head. Out there on the flatcar, once it starts raining, you'll be drenched. Besides, the first militiaman who spots you can take you off the train. But not if you're riding along with the conductor. Besides, it's warm here."

Andrei sighed. It was obvious this was the better choice, but, on the other hand, there was the danger of one of the other conductors turning out to be a mean person. What if one of the mean ones handed him over to the militia?

He sighed again and glanced at Nikolai Petrovich who was still sitting on the raincoat, polishing the panes of a couple of lanterns with a rag. Then he lined the lanterns against the wall, got up, shook out the raincoat, hung it back on the nail, leaned on the low railing of the platform and went back to shelling and eating sunflower seeds.

"Want some?" he said, offering Andrei a handfull.

Andrei joined him at the rail and accepted the offer. Nikolai Petrovich did not question him further, nor did he demand a reply to his suggestion. This put Andrei at his ease. Indeed, a real man should not nag a person. He said something once, and that was quite enough. It was now up to him to think the offer over and decide. But this was just what he could not do.

"All right," Andrei finally said, becoming frightened at the sound of the words. "Ask your friend. I agree."

"That's very wise of you. You're not making a mistake."

At the very first stop they both ran down the length of the train to the car where Andrei's things were. They picked up his sack and jacket, and returned to the brake platform.

The train continued on its way, stopping time and again at sidings and small stations jam-packed with freight trains. Andrei would jump down to stretch his legs without fear of being caught. Trainmen running by paid no attention to him, and this gladdened his heart.

As the train rolled on Andrei told Nikolai Petrovich about Shantara, Zvenigora and the Gromotukha, and always ended up by telling him about the fishing there.

"The perch in the Gromotukha are as big as crocodiles. When you get a bite, you feel like somebody hit your rod with a big stick. Why don't you come and visit me when I get back from the war? Then we can go fishing together. Do you want to?"

"I certainly do. You and me are friends now."

Every now and then Andrei would gaze off thoughtfully at the trees flashing by and say, "Those other conductors you know won't make me get off, will they? Can I trust them?"

"I can vouch for them."

"Are you sure? "

"If I wasn't, I'd never mention it to them. Don't worry, Andrei. Everything'll turn out fine."

"All right. I believe you."

They drew into the small city towards evening. Soon they were passing weary-looking, low wooden houses and barracks. The houses, the barracks, the few naked trees and the dreary outbuildings were all black from soot and smoke.

"Is this Chulymsk? "

"Yes."

As at all the other stations they had passed, Chulymsk was a maze of troop trains. It was strange and unbelievable to see their train cutting into the sea of railway cars. The locomotives would find a vacant track and squeeze through the solid wall of freight trains.

"Here we are. This is a long stop. Let's go into the conductor's lounge and I'll introduce you to my mate."

Andrei slung his sack over his shoulder. They made their way to the crowded platform. Men and women were sitting on bundles and suitcases, milling around the station, walking up and down in droves, apparently waiting for the arrival of a passenger train.

Nikolai Petrovich took Andrei down a dark, dirty corridor and pushed one of the doors. It was locked. However, the key was in the keyhole.

"I wonder where she's gone? " Nikolai Petrovich mused aloud as he stood facing the locked door.

"Who? "

"The conductor. The one who relieves me."

"Conductors are men, not ladies."

"You're wrong there. There are women conductors here, too."

Nikolai Petrovich's voice sounded different than it had before. There was a trace of guilt in it. His changed voice and the fact that the conductor who relieved him was a woman, and even the battered door with the key in the keyhole put Andrei on his guard. "Hm. That's funny," he said to himself, but had no time to develop the thought, since Nikolai Petrovich turned the key, opened the door and prodded him into the room.

It was fairly large and bright. There was a desk in a corner with some papers spread out on it. A long, worn, padded bench and several chairs were lined up along one of the walls. No single item seemed in any way threatening until his eyes came to light on the single window. It was barred with criss-cross wiring. There was a poster on the wall. It depicted a pink-cheeked militiaman directing traffic on a busy street and a group of children in pairs crossing. Andrei was immediately struck by the significance of all this. He turned pale and spun around to face Nikolai Petrovich. His lips were trembling.

"I've got to, Andrei. Try to understand me," Nikolai Petrovich was saying, avoiding his eyes.

"But I trusted you! I believed you! "

"I'll come to see you after the war anyway, and we'll go fishing together."

"You're a ... traitor! "

Nikolai Petrovich backed away as from a blow. He looked at Andrei sadly and opened the door with his back. Andrei rushed into the breach, hoping to escape as the man he now hated exited, but crashed into the door as it was slammed shut in his face. He pounded on it. His nails dug into it as he screamed, "Traitor! Traitor! Traitor! " He sank down on the floor, wailing like a puppy. His hat fell off his head.

A short while later the key turned in the lock. Someone raised him up, sat him on the old bench and even stroked his hair. Andrei guessed it was the militiaman. He whacked at the arm angrily, pressed his forehead against the cold wall and burst into tears again.

The militiaman did not utter a sound. Andrei was determined not to look at him, but he could tell by the sounds and the rustling that the man had gone over to sit at his desk and was looking through his papers. "I don't care. I'll just sit here. I'll die before I'll ever look at him," he was thinking stubbornly when his sobs had subsided. Suddenly a train whistled loudly and deeply outside. Perhaps it was the passenger train at last, or maybe the freight train he had arrived on and which was now leaving. Andrei straightened up quickly. He was surprised to see that the person at the desk was a militia lady, not a militia-

man. She seemed to be about the same age as Vera Iniu-tina. She had laughing, curious eyes, a young girl's eyes, really, but as soon as she saw Andrei staring at her she blinked rapidly, sighed and said in a kindly voice,

"It's awful, isn't it? "

"Go to hell."

"It's not nice to speak to your elders so rudely, Andrei, dear."

"I'm no Andrei dear."

"You certainly are. You're Andrei Savelyev, and you live in Shantara, near Novosibirsk. It's a long way to take you back! "

"That rat! He told her everytling! Stupid me. I thought he had kind eyes and a nice moustache. But his moustache is like a rat's tail, and his eyes are mean and shifty. That's why he was afraid to look me in the eye. No, he wasn't. He was just pretending. People like him never feel ashamed."

* * *

In two days Andrei was back again in Shantara.

The girl in the militia uniform finished looking through her papers and then took him to a cafeteria for supper. He refused to eat. Then she took him to jail. Actually, it wasn't a real jail. It was a place like the room at the railroad station, although there was no desk in it. It had a broad wooden ledge running the entire length of the wall, and there were real iron bars on the windows. Besides, there was a militiaman on guard outside the door who kept walking up and down all night, coughing every now and then.

The next morning the girl came for him. She gripped his hand tightly and led him back to the station. He then found himself in a dimly-lit, heated freight car. The floor was covered with a thick layer of straw. There were about fifteen boys his age and even one girl with dirty little pigtails. They were all either sitting or lying on the straw. A taciturn, bony militiaman was escorting them. Their car was attached to the last car of a passenger train. Andrei

crouched in the darkest corner and wept silently for a long time.

All the boys and the girl were from Novosibirsk. As soon as the train pulled into the station there their car was surrounded by anxious parents and grandparents, all of whom began to shout and many even began to weep. The bony militiaman then shouted out names from a list and made the parents sign their names on the sheet of paper before he released his charges, one at a time, mumbling:

"You've let your children run wild, and now we've got to round them up for you! You'd better keep an eye on them from now on."

Andrei travelled by passenger train from Novosibirsk to Shantara, pressed against the side of the car by the militiaman. He kept gazing out of the window dolefully. The militiaman dozed, breathing with a low, whistling sound, but every time Andrei as much as moved a muscle he would immediately open his eyes and his drooping chin would twitch as disgustingly as a frog's.

Andrei fell into his mother's arms as he stepped down from the car.

"My darling, my darling," she wept as she kissed his face and pressed his head against her soft bosom. "Why'd you run away? I nearly died."

"You people let your kids run wild," the militiaman was muttering the familiar words as he handed Anna his sheet of paper. "Sign here for delivery."

Once back home, she took Andrei straight to the bathhouse which had been heated in advance, and then sat him down at the kitchen table, treating him to tea and cream, like an honored guest. Then she placed a dish of candies individually wrapped in bright wrappers in front of him.

He was still drinking his tea when his father returned from work.

"What he needs is a good whipping, not candy," Fyodor blurted as he pulled his dirty boots off by the door and dropped each one with a thud. He then stamped out to the bathhouse.

Soon after the door opened again. It was Semyon, coming home from work.

"Oh, so the runaway's back? How'll the Red Army

make out without you? ”

The taunt lashed at Andrei harder than his father's threat had. The blood rushed to his head. He pushed away his cup and the dish of candy.

“Isn't that funny? ” he shouted and his eyes blazed.

“Andrei! Semyon! Don't be like that, Semyon. Go on, have some candy, darling,” Anna interceded.

“Why don't you grow a moustache? You'd look just like the conductor then! ”

“Which conductor? You mean a conductor took you off the train? ”

“It's none of your business.” After a short pause Andrei added, “That lousy rat said he'd come here to go fishing. If he ever does.... What're you staring at? ” This was addressed to Dima and Ganka who had just come home from school and were indeed staring at him in astonishment. He looked at them arrogantly. Feeling himself rather like a hero, he went outside.

Half an hour later Andrei was seated on a porch step of the Iniutin's house, telling Kolya, Ganka, Dima and Vitya Kashkarov all about his adventures. Ever since he had been caught, and even as recently as that very morning, he had been positive that he would never tell a soul about his so shamefully-ended journey. Several minutes before, seeing that Ganka was actually gaping as she stared at him, he decided there really was nothing to be ashamed of. After all, it wasn't his fault if he hadn't reached the front lines..

Ganka was still staring at him in wonder. Her teeth showed white in the gloom, and her deep eyes were as round as saucers. She was breathing rapidly. Every now and then she would emit a small squeak. Whenever she did, Dima's heavy brows would contract in a frown as he slowly turned to look at her. Then she would blink rapidly, as if apologizing for the squeak. Kolya Iniutin now gazed at Andrei doubtfully, and now scratched his nose thoughtfully as he stared down at his feet. Vitya Kashkarov was the only one who sat very still, as was his wont. It seemed that he was not even listening to Andrei but was lost in thought, trying unsuccessfully to solve some difficult problem. Vitya had always been a quiet, solemn boy,

but after the highjacking, his long stay in the militia and his release after Makar's trial, he seemed to have turned to stone. No one could ever get a word out of him now.

It was pitch dark. The sky had gone out, closing tightly in above the earth like the lid of some tremendous trunk. The only light there was came from the West, where the sun went down every evening. There was a long, narrow strip of bloody-red which was quickly becoming smaller and fading away. A wind was blowing up. It was not strong, but so cold it chilled them to the bone. It seemed to be rushing in upon the earth through the bloody-red strip in the sky, spreading over the fields and the great expanses. It seemed to come through the strip as hot as steam, but lost all of its warmth by the time it reached Shantara, becoming as sluggish and cold as the water in the Gromotukha in winter.

They were silent for a while after Andrei had finished his tale. Then Ganka pressed her hands to her flaming cheeks and said,

"Weren't you scared? I mean, being all alone on the open car at night? "

"What's there to be scared of? I wasn't out in the woods."

"Still. No, I'd never do that."

"He's lying," Dima spoke up.

"About what? " Ganka asked.

"About not being scared."

Ganka did not reply. She blinked hard. "Even though it was only just a little bit scary, none of you tried to run away. But he...."

"That's because he's a stupid fool. And you think it's all so interesting your mouth was even hanging open."

"You, you...." Ganka jumped up, turned and ran out of the yard.

"Hey, Ganka! What's...." Dima rose, but did not move. "Stupid. What's the matter with her? "

"Wait till I tell her you said she's stupid," Kolya taunted.

"Oh, you will? Want me to push your face in? "

"You'll have to grow some till you reach it," Kolya said, rising to his full height.

Dima backed away, and though Kolya sat down again,

he kept backing away and mumbling. Then he sliced the air with his hand and ran off. Kolya spat in disgust.

"Go on, run after her," he said.

"Why should he run after her?" Andrei asked.

"Don't you know? Don't you know what they call him at school? Ganka's shepherd."

"Why?"

"Baby," Kolya said and laughed. "Can't you see her tits are growing?"

"So what?"

"You're still a baby, you wouldn't know. That's why that conductor trapped you."

Suddenly Vitya Kashkarov got up, stood swaying in the wind for a few moments as he breathed on his cold hands, then stuck them into the sleeves of his tattered coat and said angrily, "That conductor was probably a louse just like you!"

"Wh-a-at?" Kolya began to rise menacingly again.

"Who told Semyon I was sleeping over at your place? And he told Yelizarov, the militiaman. You're a rat, that's what you are. And I thought you were my friend. I trusted you."

"Why, you bastard!" Kolya muttered and took a step towards him. "You and Makar stole a whole truckfull of stuff that belongs to the people, and now...."

"Shut up!" Vitya shouted and pulled his hands out of his sleeves.

Kolya stopped short. Vitya turned slowly and trudged off, eyes on the ground. He walked slowly, as if he was again thinking over a most difficult problem.

Andrei and Kolya were now left alone. They sat in silence for a while.

"He really is a bastard. And as far as that goes, it's your brother Semyon who's a rat, not me. I told him it was a secret. How could I know he'd go running to Yelizarov? I trusted him like he was an honest man."

Andrei sighed and said, "I found out something. You can't trust anybody. Nohow. If I didn't tell that conductor who I was and where I was from, and especially where I was going, and then, later, at the militia station, too, what'd they have done to me? Hm?"

"I don't know. Maybe they'd have put you in a children's home. Or maybe even in jail."

"I guess so." Then he began to think aloud in a very adult way. "They had no right to put me in jail. I'm not a thief or anything. But I'd have run away if they'd put me in a children's home. The main thing is not to get caught. And never trust anybody. That's for sure."

"You mean you're going to run away again?"

Andrei started visibly. He rose, stood there for a moment and said, trying to sound convincing, "No. I'll never run away again. You think it's fun hiding in freight trains?" As he spoke, he knew in his heart of hearts that he would run away again, although he did not know when the occasion would present itself. Winter was upon them, and this worried him. Winter was not summer. A person could freeze to death in no time riding an open flatcar or a cold freight. However, he could not risk waiting till summer, because the war might end by then. Most important, neither Kolya nor anybody else was to know about these vague thoughts and plans of his. He had learned his lesson.

* * *

On the afternoon of October 22, Kruzhilin, Polipov and Anton Savelyev came to the railroad station to meet the train from Novosibirsk. Subbotin, Secretary of the Regional Party Committee, would be on the train. However, they did not know whether he was coming to discuss plant affairs or the state of affairs in the district. Subbotin usually phoned whenever he was planning a trip to Shantara, but this time he had merely sent them a telegram.

It was snowing and raining, and the snow was slow in melting on the asphalt, so that the entire platform was covered with large snowflakes. The wet rails gleamed dully. The station's outbuildings to the left of the platform seemed to be melting away in the cold, gray haze. The platform was deserted. A trackman carrying a long-spouted oil can or a conductor carrying an unlit lantern would

occasionally hurry by.

The rain and snow dripped off their raincoats as they huddled in a small group with their backs to the wind.

A loudspeaker was attached over the station door, and the dull voice of the announcer reading the latest news dispatches echoed across the empty platform. As yesterday, and as the day before, and for many days and weeks before that, the news was disheartening. He was saying: "During the night of October 21st battles raged along the entire front. The heaviest fighting was along the Mozhaïsk, Maly Yaroslavets and Kalinin sections of the front."

The enemy was pressing on towards Moscow. In his mind's eye Kruzhilin visualized the wall map in his office. "Mozhaïsk, Maly Yaroslavets, Borovsk, Kaluga. It's about a hundred or hundred and twenty kilometers from Moscow, no more. But Mozhaïsk and Maly Yaroslavets fell a week ago, on the 16th. The Germans are in Borovsk, too. They took Kaluga on the 12th. Where are they now? A state of siege was declared in Moscow the day before yesterday. What'll happen to the city? "

He looked at his companions. Both were listening intently to the announcer's voice. Savelyev's tired eyes were half-shut as he stared off in the direction of the semaphore. It could usually be seen above the roof of the warehouse, but now neither the semaphore nor the roof were visible. Polipov had pulled the hood of his raincoat over part of his face. His head was lowered and his round cheeks had turned blue from the cold.

Moscow was in everyone's thoughts now. For the hundredth or perhaps thousandth time Kruzhilin was trying to understand how the nazi troops had managed to advance to within the very walls of the capital.

The rain continued, falling dully on the stiff hood of the heavy canvas raincoat. "The circle around Moscow is getting tighter and tighter," Kruzhilin was thinking as he walked along the platform, staring at the slush spattering under foot. "So far, however, it's still a horseshoe, not a circle. Leningrad's been encircled since September. Like Odessa. Will the same thing happen to Leningrad, the cradle of our revolution? " He shuddered, but banished the thought from his mind. "No. That's impossible. We can't

let it happen. Moscow will have no support then. Kalinin, the only large city protecting it from the north-west, fell over a week ago. The front line has reached Tula in the south-west. If Tula falls, Leningrad will, too. Then Moscow will be caught in a pincers. They'll press on towards Yaroslavl in the north and towards Gorky and Ivanovo in the south. And if they're not stopped the horseshoe'll become a circle. And when the circle closes...." A blast from a train whistle made him start again. "I'm a real parlor strategist." He cursed himself and watched the dirty-green train glide into the station, appearing soundlessly from the fog. Subbotin descended. He was freshly-shaven and had on a blacktop coat and a leather cap. He looked coldly at each of the welcoming party in turn.

"Why're you all here? Don't you have anything else to do? "

"Etiquette calls for me to be here," Kruzhilin said and smiled.

Subbotin did not return his smile. He turned to Polipov. "What about you? "

"Consider it a matter of polite duty," Polipov pouted. "Is it against the rules? "

"What about you, Anton? Am I to consider it a matter of your duty, too? "

"I'm simply obliged to. After all, you're in charge of all the evacuated plants, Ivan Mikhailovich."

"I see. All right, let's go. Show me your plant."

They walked along the platform, with Subbotin leading the way. He strode on resolutely, but his back was hunched and his thin, wrinkled neck seemed barely able to carry the weight of his head. Kruzhilin was thinking that he was getting on in years, that he was probably sixty by now. One did not think of Subbotin's age when one saw his clear gray eyes, his pink, wrinkle-free, forever cleanly-shaven cheeks and his narrow, youthful shoulders. Even his hair and eyebrows, which had turned completely gray of late, did not seem to make him look any older. His stooped back as he walked and his thin, wrinkled neck alone proclaimed his age.

He seemed surly during the drive. Nor did he speak to them while they were inspecting the chaotic building site,

accompanied now by Nechayev, the chief engineer, who had met them at the gate.

Trucks were moving in all directions, excavator scoops swung up and down, people were everywhere, drenched and chilled, some wearing raincoats, some with gunny sacks thrown over their heads to protect them from the rain. They shouted, argued, and waved their hands, while the truck motors roared, straining to drag the wheels out of the deep mud.

It seemed strange to see the bricklayers, spread out along the rising walls of the buildings, working quickly and silently, paying no attention to the commotion below or to the driving rain and snow. Every now and then one of them would shout,

"Let's have some more bricks!"

"Send up some more cement! What's the matter? Are you all sleeping down there?"

Having inspected the site, Subbotin entered one of the buildings under construction. The walls were completed, and large girders now spanned them. Showers of sparks from where the welders were working cascaded down upon them. Rain-drenched men and women were working at their humming lathes, paying no attention to the rain, the snow or the sparks. The aisles running down the four rows of lathes were covered with wet planks. Women were pushing small carts along the aisles, collecting artillery shells and rolling them off through a large opening in one of the walls to a long wooden shed with a tar paper roof.

Subbotin stood there for about five minutes, watching the workers at the lathes and the women pushing the carts. The corners of his mouth turned down sadly. Then, suddenly, turning to Polipov, he said, and his question seemed quite strange, "What sort of bread are you giving the workers? Rye or white?"

"What?" Polipov's eyelids twitched.

Subbotin smiled wryly and pulled his leather cap down further on his head. "If I recall, Pyotr Petrovich, your lips used to twitch whenever you were nervous. I see now that your eyes have begun to twitch as well."

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"All right, let's see your famous underground city."

The huge pit that was being rimmed with dugouts as with a string of beads was surrounded with mounds of wet, slippery earth. The excavators were now gone, for they had completed their job. Many of the dugouts were inhabited. Others were being lined with boards and roofed over with wooden beams that were then covered with earth. A make-shift carpentry shop had been set up under a long overhang. A circular saw whined loudly. About fifty elderly men were busy planing boards and making window and door frames.

Subbotin walked along the length of the shop, taking in the mounds of earth and the chimneys, many of which were smoking, that protruded from under the ground. He made his way cautiously along the wet slope, trying to keep his balance and not fall into the pit, as he headed towards the dugouts, signalling to his companions to wait for him in the shop.

The dugout he entered was large, divided into two chambers and dark. There was a small brick stove in the front half of the burrow. An old woman was mixing something in a pot at the stove. The wide bunks along the walls were covered with rags. A young couple were asleep on the bunk to the right of the entrance. The air was heavy with the smell of cabbage soup, which all but drowned out the fading aroma of fresh pine planks.

Subbotin greeted the old woman, who merely glanced at him.

"It's not easy, is it?" he said. Then, removing his cap, he sat down on a stool.

"That's putting it mildly. Look at the newlyweds!" The woman nodded at the young couple. "They're all in after working the night shift and getting drenched to the bone. That's my daughter. There are two other families here besides us. So that'll give you an idea of what it's like. Who are you?"

"I'm from Novosibirsk. I'm the Secretary of the Regional Committee."

"Ah," she said indifferently, but then turned away from the stove, taking a seat on a stool opposite, and wiped her bony hands on her apron. "So you've come to have a look and see how we're struggling along here?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to help us? "

"How can I? "

"Well, at least by coming here and seeing how it is."

Subbotin felt a pang in his heart.

She continued, "After you have a good look your soul won't be the same. If there was anything black in it, it'll all be washed away. I mean, if it's a good soul. And you'll be a kinder man after." She went back to her stove and the pot. Subbotin left the dugout.

His group was awaiting him in the shop.

"I have an idea of what's going on now. Are there many cases of sickness? "

"Not many at all, strangely. Mostly colds," Savelyev replied.

"Where do you treat them? "

"At the district clinic. That barracks over there is the plant hospital. You can have a look if you want to."

"What are those buildings going up beside it? " "Those are living quarters. There are forty rooms in every barracks. So far, twelve are under construction. We'll start another forty after the November holidays. The lumber is on the way. After that, we'll put up whatever we can as the building materials arrive. We can't keep the people in dugouts more than this one winter."

"I know." Subbotin fixed his keen eyes on Polipov. "There's a very interesting old woman in the dugout I just visited. It'll do you good to drop in and have a talk with her."

Polipov shrugged.

"How is Liza? " Subbotin asked, addressing Anton. "I really want to see her."

"She's all right, so far. How about coming over today? We can put you up for the night."

"Yes, I'll drop in. Well, comrades, thank you for showing me around. This'll be all. Kruzhilin and I will go have a look at how things are coming along in the district."

Kruzhilin looked at him in surprise, but Subbotin was busy shaking hands. Once alone, Kruzhilin asked,

"Do you really mean it? The roads are so muddy no car can pass."

"Yes, I do. Or at least, we'll see the Red Wheat Collective Farm. If I'm not mistaken, that farm delivered the most grain to the State, didn't it? Do you think you can find me a raincoat? "

* * *

Brown Falcon drew the wicker carriage easily along the slushy, muddy road to the far end of the village. He had been stabled for so long that now he trotted briskly. Clods of mud spun off the wheels. After a while, Brown Falcon slowed down and then continued at a walk. His gleaming sides heaved.

As they rode along Kruzhilin was trying to guess what had brought Subbotin to the district. He had made a cursory inspection of the plant. Now they were on their way to the Red Wheat Farm. Why had he asked to see it? Was it because of Nazarov's willfulness? That was the thought that had immediately entered his mind when Subbotin had asked Polipov, seemingly out of the blue, what kind of bread the workers were supposed to get. Then again, ever since the first days of the war, Subbotin had been put in charge of all the evacuated enterprises in the region. Besides, Kruzhilin had not reported the fact that Nazarov had planted half of the fields to rye, and Polipov had in the end stricken the question of Nazarov's action from the agenda.

It seemed there would be no end to the icy rain mixed in with snow. Then, suddenly, the rain stopped and it began snowing heavily. They soon felt boxed in by the snow. In but a few moments' time it seemed that the wet fields and muddy road had been covered with a huge white sheet that had fallen upon them from the sky. Shreds of the sheet hung from the twigs of bushes along the way and on the horse's steaming body.

"It looks like winter at last. Can you feel how cold it's getting? " Kruzhilin said.

"Yes." Then Subbotin added, as if sensing what Kruzhilin was thinking about, "Don't be surprised by this trip of ours. I've been switched over to agriculture again. Ever since October."

"I'm glad." But to himself Kruzhilin said, "Yes, it's on account of Nazarov."

"I can tell you something from what I know of how things are coming along in the region. I mean about setting up the evacuated enterprises. I realize you can't keep the people in those dugouts for long. You've got twelve barracks going up, and you're expecting large shipments of lumber. I don't think you'll ever get them."

"Why not? "

"Can't you guess? "

"I see."

"New plants are being evacuated," Subbotin's voice was not as harsh now, "and they have to be put into operation, while your plant is already functioning."

The snow kept falling intermittently. Every time it stopped they would have a glimpse of the vast white expanse of the snow-covered fields. Then it would start snowing again, each time more heavily than before. It kept getting colder and colder. Brown Falcon took them to the top of a hill and started down briskly. To the right and moving away was Zvenigora, invisible beyond the solid wall of falling snow.

Their horse seemed excited by the snow. He kept snorting and shaking his head, and at times would break into a trot, but each time he did Kruzhilin would rein him in gently.

The wheels left two deep, black grooves in the road that were then quickly filled in with snow. From up ahead they heard muted shouting and whistling. The sounds were coming closer. Then a voice broke over the general hum and shouted:

"Come on, boys! Give them a hand! Give them a hand till we reach the top of a hill! Come on! "

It was a boy's high-pitched voice slicing through the swirling snow and ringing under Kruzhilin's hood. First, a gig appeared and then, as from a fog, a second, with a third a dark spot in the distance. A long wagon train was crawling up the hill towards Kruzhilin and Subbotin.

The snow-covered, weary horses, limping heavily on their forelegs, were trudging up the hill, pulling the loaded, canvas-covered carts. The sticky mud and snow seemed



wound around the wheels. The horses were exhausted. Two or three young boys were pushing each cart from behind. They were a motley group, and all of them were shouting and whistling.

"Is that grain?" Subbotin asked.

"I think so."

"Where are they from?"

"Those are the Red Wheat Farm's horses. But who ever decided to send the children out alone in such weather?" Kruzhilin reined in the horse and jumped down. "Stop!"

The wagon train continued on its way.

"Stop, I said!"

"What're you shouting about?" a boy of about thirteen who was accompanying the nearest gig said as he approached. He was carrying a whip and was dressed in a worn leather jacket that was much too big for him.

"Oh. Pull up, everybody!"

The wagon train came to a halt. Boys of about the same age as the first began approaching. They were soon standing around in a large group.

"Do you know who I am?" Kruzhilin asked.

"Sure, I saw you before. We're delivering grain to the State granary."

"I can see that. Who's in charge here?"

"Me."

"What's your name?"

"Volodya Savelyev. Why?"

"Are there any grown-ups with you?"

A skinny, bearded little old man made his way through the crowd of boys. He was straining to make out Kruzhilin's features. "What's up? Ah, the District Secretary."

"Hello, Petrovan Nikiforovich. I thought these children were all by themselves."

"Pankrat's having a hell of a time with them," the old man said, jerking his thumb off to a side. "He said how the hell can we send the grain off on such a day? Actually though, it wasn't snowing when we started out."

"We pledged to deliver a Young Pioneer wagon train of grain for the Red Army by the 22nd of October," Volodya said. "This is my class," he continued, indicating the other boys. "We harvested a whole strip. And then we threshed

and winnowed it ourselves. We got excused from school today, because this is our last chance to deliver it on time."

"That's what I said. They've driven the chairman crazy. He finally gave in and told me to go along."

"I see. Make sure that they've all dried their clothes in the watchman's room at the granary before you start back."

"Natur'ly."

"Where's Nazarov? In Mikhailovka? "

"No. He's out in the fields. They opened up a stack to start threshing it yesterday, and then it started raining last night. The women got so flustered the whole stack was nearly ruined. Thank God Pankrat came riding up in time. He told them to cover it with straw. Then he got up on top of the stack and laid the straw himself. He was roaring at everybody like a wild man. After he saw us off, he went to sleep. Maybe he's up by now."

As the old man was speaking, the wagon train started up again, and the air was filled with the boys' shouting and whistling.

"So if you want to find him, ask for the second team."

"That's just what we'll do," Subbotin said and closed his eyes. He seemed to be dozing and did not utter another word during the rest of the journey.

The second team had several wooden, weatherbeaten buildings that seemed to have been stuck onto the very edge of the forest. There were two summer houses for the field hands, an outdoor kitchen, a barn, a storehouse, a pen and a large heated threshing barn. To the west the steppe and fields stretched off as far as the Gromotukha and Zvenigora. Across the mountain were the fields of the Red Partisan Collective Farm. To the east there were woods, lakes and swamps. Although the forest had always been known hereabouts as the taiga, there were no other trees for fifteen kilometers around except birches, aspens and occasional small pines. The real taiga began beyond the Zhuravliny Swamps and Ognev Springs. The land beyond the lake where Kaftanov's retreat had once stood now belonged to still another collective farm.

The pen was now covered with snow and deserted, for

it was only used in summer. However, people were moving back and forth around the threshing barn. Planks had been laid on the ground between the large black maw of its double doors and the open doors of the granary. Women were pushing wheelbarrows loaded with grain along the planks.

It stopped snowing just as they drove up. The sky became light, giving them a clear view of the horizon. The earth, which that morning had been black, sullen and spent, had become young again and revived. Blanketed by the first snow of winter, it seemed to have heaved a sigh of relief, like a person who had worked hard all day and had finally reached his bed and rest. The trees with their snow-heavy boughs loomed silently, as if afraid to stir, afraid to interrupt the earth's first light, but sweetest slumber. The snow-whitened cliffs of Zvenigora floated silently among the gray clouds, now appearing, now disappearing, so that it looked as though the stone giants were bowing to the earth as it performed that which it was destined to perform each year from the beginning of time: awakening into blossom in spring; ripening and gaining strength through the summer; bringing forth its fruit joyously and abundantly in autumn; and, having spent itself, lying quietly beneath the snow all winter, storing up new, vital strength.

Pankrat Nazarov was indeed sound asleep on an old plank bed with a sheepskin coat for a cover. The stove was going, and a fat young woman was washing potatoes in a basin beside it. As the men entered she went over to the bed to say,

"Get up, Uncle Pankrat. Some people have come to see you."

The chairman sat up, swung his bare, sinewy legs over the side of the bed and began to cough. He looked out the window and stopped coughing. Something resembling a smile touched his sleepy face. "Thank God. It's finally winter." Then only did he turn to look at his visitors. "Ah! What a surprise. Welcome, welcome! Put the kettle on, Tonya."

"There's a whole pot of boiling water," the girl said and pulled a huge iron pot from the stove with a pair of

oven prongs. She set three tin mugs on the table and a blue bowl of honey. "I'm going to the kitchen to make lunch for the women."

"Yes, run along," Nazarov replied. Then he turned to the men to say, "I told the women to start threshing the grain for seed yesterday, and then it started to rain. They nearly ruined our stack of seed grain." Then, thinking that his visitors might not have understood how that had come about, he added, "That's because women have no brains. It's all screaming and commotion, and hardly any sense to what they're doing."

"We met Petrovan Golovlyov and the boys on the hill. He told us all about it."

"Ah. Well, that's what it's like," Nazarov said and bent over to his foot-cloth.

Tonya, the cook, poured boiling water from the pot into a pail, leaving a little for the men, then picked up the basin of washed potatoes and went towards the door. Subbotin opened it for her. She looked at him in surprise and blushed.

The three men had tea, dipping chunks of fresh white bread into the bowl of honey. When they had finished Nazarov said, glancing out of the window again,

"It's a good thing it's snowed not on dry ground. Well? What brings you here? Which side are the blows going to fall on now?"

"You seem to be expecting them?"

"When did the authorities coming down to the farm ever mean good news?"

"I can see there's no love lost between you and your chiefs," Subbotin said.

"Depending on who it is."

"No matter who. You've got nothing to worry about. Your farm's delivered more grain than any other this year, and you're still continuing your deliveries."

"You're right about that," the old chairman sighed and scratched his beard. "But, as they say, don't forget to keep your backside out of reach while the authorities are praising you."

"Which sounds like you feel that something's wrong." Subbotin caught Nazarov's eyes and for few long seconds

he stared hard at the chairman, who did not avert his own. He looked calmly and reproachfully at the Secretary of the Regional Committee, attempting, in turn, to stare Subbotin down and accuse him silently for something.

"Are you putting away rye or wheat for seed?" Subbotin asked.

"So that's how he struck the question from the agenda!" Kruzhilin said to himself angrily, thinking about Polipov. "That bastard."

"What's bitten you?" Subbotin asked, turning to him.

"I'm thinking about human treachery. So Polipov complained to the Regional Committee? It would've been better if he'd have spoken up instead of acting on the sly."

"No one's complained to the Regional Committee, Kruzhilin," Subbotin said sternly. "Well, Pankrat Grigoryevich? What are you putting away for seed? Rye or wheat?"

"What's the sense answering stupid questions?"

"What?"

"What's the sense putting rye away when it's already planted? We're putting away wheat. We'll sow a few of the fields to wheat."

Subbotin's head dropped. "Indeed. I must be getting old."

"You're just tired, Ivan Mikhailovich," Kruzhilin said.

"Yes, that must be it," Subbotin agreed, nodding gratefully. "My head's spinning from all these lathes, timber, cement and freight trains. Just try to imagine train after trainful of people and machinery. Do you have any idea what it's like at the station in town? Or at the Regional Committee and Regional Executive Committee? We've got to provide food and shelter for everyone and set up the machinery. The Committee is in session day and night, trying to solve all these questions. And the people who are waiting for their next are actually sleeping in the corridors outside our offices. Sometimes we have to look through all those sleeping bodies to find whoever it is whose question has come up for discussion. It only adds to the general confusion in my head." He was silent for a long time. Finally, he said,

"I hope you've thought every aspect through to the

end before deciding to do what you did. Remember the saying: when embarking on something, always think of the end."

"Yes, I know. But there's another saying, too: you might put your finger in somebody's mouth and lose a hand."

Subbotin did not immediately understand what Nazarov was getting at. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes as he mused over the chairman's words.

"This year we were able to send off so much grain to the State granary on account of our rye harvest, even though next-to-nothing on the farm was sowed to rye," Nazarov prompted. "Now, if we'd have sown more to rye...."

"What's your opinion, Polikarp?"

"I agree with him. If not for the Red Wheat Farm, the district wouldn't have met its grain quota."

"I see," Subbotin said with a sigh. "And what am I supposed to do?"

It was dark when they set out on the return journey to the district center. The rested horse took them swiftly up the hill, and the wheels clattered loudly on the bumpy, frozen dirt road.

"The boys haven't come back from the granary yet, have they?" Subbotin suddenly said.

"I don't think so."

Subbotin dozed, leaning back in the whicker cart. It seemed that although his eyes were closed, he was still going over the figures Nazarov had quoted during their long talk when he had described the farm's fields, evaluating each and every one.

"Now you take this one that's between the ravine and the birch copse. It's about hundred and fifty hectares." Nazarov poked his gnarled finger at the sheet of paper he had torn out of the centerfold of a notebook and on which he had quickly sketched the farm's holdings. His voice was hoarse. "We sowed wheat here this year. Our harvest wasn't too bad, considering the weather, but, what's most important, we finished harvesting just in time. Fyodor Savelyev's on the combine. He'll never lose a single ear. He's a real bastard, but no one can say he's not our best

worker. Still and all, when rye is planted here the harvest is always increased by six or seven centners. We've checked it out over the years. Now, if we put that into poods, it means we could have harvested five or six thousand poods more than we did. Now take the field that comes down to the Gromotukha over here...."

Subbotin was taking notes. He did not want to interrupt the chairman. Then, gnawing on the end of his pencil, he calculated for a while and finally said, "According to your figuring, you'll harvest twice as much rye next fall as the fields would have produced if you'd sowed wheat."

"It all depends on the weather. If it's a good year, we will."

"And what if it isn't? "

"It's all in God's hands. But no matter what, it won't be less. So there's no risk. But there's a big risk if we'd have sowed the fields to wheat. So what's the use risking it? That's playing with fire."

Nazarov's argument was simple and convincing.

"Don't you have anything to say? " Subbotin asked in an annoyed voice turning to Kruzhilin.

"I can't explain it any better than Pankrat has."

Subbotin then inspected the barn, the threshing machine and the haystack that had nearly been ruined by the rain. The women were taking it apart again in order to start threshing. They were busy throwing off the covering of frozen layers of straw.

"Don't stop for a minute, girls. And keep on into the night by the light of lanterns," the chairman said and then went over to a tractor driver who was bent over his tractor. "There aren't any more driving belts, so make sure this one doesn't tear again. You'll be sorry you were ever born if it does."

One of the women giggled, then clapped her hand to her mouth and ducked behind the threshing machine.

"Or else I'll make a new one from your filthy tongue. You've never heard anyone curse like him. It's enough to make a grown man blush," Nazarov said.

"What if it starts raining again?" Subbotin asked, glancing up at the sky and the drifting shreds of clouds.

"It won't. There's a cold wind blowing from the

Gromotukha, and that means it'll bring clear weather. I think winter has set in for good."

Indeed, the sky had begun to clear and the first few big stars winked in the dark spaces overhead.

"What's the final decision going to be as far as we're concerned, Ivan Mikhailovich?" Kruzhilin asked.

"Decision?" Subbotin repeated in surprise. "You tell me what your decision's going to be as far as the workers of your plant are concerned. They can't live in those dugouts for more than one winter, and you'll never get the lumber you're counting on. I told you that a couple of hours ago, so you've had a chance to think it over. Or haven't you been thinking about it?"

"I have. We'll set up several teams and send them into the taiga to fell trees. That's our only hope. But it's not all that easy to cut as much as we need. The main problem will be getting the logs out of the forest. The only solution is to float them down the Gromotukha next spring. That'll give you an idea of how much we can do in one short summer. Which means that some of the workers will still be living in dugouts next winter."

"Can't you saw the logs up right in the forest?"

"Certainly. That's what they'll probably do. But how much do you think that will be, since all they have are hand saws? Maybe the region or Moscow will send us a few shipments of lumber?"

"Moscow...." Subbotin repeated softly, and the sound of the word still hung in the air when Kruzhilin realized that he had said "Moscow" from force of habit born in pre-war years, because neither in his heart nor in his mind could he accept the fact that the fate of Moscow now hung by a thread, and it could not offer any help.

Up ahead in the darkness they heard a strange commotion which soon turned into the sound of wheels clattering over the frozen road. To this was added the sound of piping children's voices.

"It's the boys coming back from the granary!" Subbotin exclaimed.

Soon the first wagons were passing their carriage. Some of them were empty, while on others little groups of boys clustered together, talking excitedly, pushing and shoving,

and laughing, trying to keep warm, for as more and more stars appeared in the sky the night was becoming colder and colder.

"Hey! Where's the man in charge?" Subbotin shouted.

The shouting and laughter died down.

Subbotin had gotten out of the carriage. He stood facing the lead wagons which were still moving. Volodya Savelyev approached from behind. He had stuck his whip handle into the top of his boot like a seasoned driver. He said,

"Here I am. What's the matter?"

"Hello again, uh, Volodya. That's your name, isn't it?" Subbotin said and offered him his hand.

"Yes," the boy replied, hesitated, and then took the proffered hand.

"My name's Ivan Mikhailovich Subbotin. I'm Secretary of the Regional Party Committee. So now we're acquainted. Did you deliver the grain?"

"Yes."

"Did you dry your clothes before you set out?"

"Yes. That's why we're so late. But we know the road back." Volodya spoke slowly, like a grown man.

"And where's the old man?"

"He's sleeping in the last wagon. He's a bit drunk."

"What?"

"Just a little. He met some of his friends at the granary, and they had a couple of drinks. But he's all right. I covered him up with some canvas and piled straw on top, so he won't be cold. We all like him."

The last wagon rumbled by.

"Is there anything else? If I don't hurry, it'll be a long run to catch up."

"No. I just wanted to get acquainted. You're a fine fellow. How are you making out in school?"

"All right. I've got some 'D's', though."

"You do? And do you get 'D's' often?"

"Sometimes," the boy said ruefully.

"That's no good at all."

"I know."

"Well, you'd better hurry."

Volodya ran off to catch up with the last wagon. Subbotin gazed after him until he had disappeared in the darkness.

"He's a fine boy," he said as he climbed back into the carriage. "I took a liking to him from the start."

"If it's of any interest to you, he's Ivan Savelyev's boy. Ivan's the youngest of the Savelyev brothers. He just recently got back from prison. I told you about him."

"Yes. I recall that was the Savelyev who served with the White guards, didn't he? "

"It was a group of kulak bandits. Then he came over to our side."

"Yes, I remember. You never know how things'll turn out," he mused. "How's he making out now? "

"All right. He has a job. He's all right."

"What about Fyodor? "

"You heard what Nazarov said. He's a bastard, but a good worker. I can't add anything to that."

"So you really don't know what he's like? "

"It's no easy job looking into another man's soul."

"I agree. What are the people saying about the war? "

"It's hard on everybody, but everybody's waiting for the turning-point in the war. They're waiting, and they have faith."

Subbotin was silent for a while. When he spoke he seemed to be thinking outloud. "You know, if you think about it, it really is amazing. The Germans have occupied large areas of the country, and they're the richest, most industrially developed ones. The nazis are pressing on. They've practically reached the outskirts of Moscow, but the people have faith in the future. They know there'll be a change in the tides of war and that it's not far off. The hardships are staggering. Actually there's reason to lose faith and become despondent, but instead, the people are convinced they'll be victorious. Why? How come? " He was silent again, as if regretting these questions. Then he continued, "Because they realize that the country can exist as a military force now only because of what the Urals and Siberia are producing. And you know this isn't an industrial area. But it will be."

The wheels of their carriage clattered loudly over the

frozen road, and the sound was probably carried far across the vast, snow-covered fields.

"The nazis had it all planned right. Their military strength is greater. They had every opportunity to turn this into a Blitzkrieg, cutting off our industrial areas and leaving Russia disarmed and helpless. It sounded all right, but it was too simple. They never dreamed we could manage to evacuate hundreds of factories and plants, and then put them into operation far beyond the Urals in record time. Nothing of the sort has ever been done before. But we've done it. I don't think we can really evaluate the full significance of this unprecedented feat of our people as yet. But the end result is that we've already won the war! Some day, after victory has been won, we'll look back in wonder and ask ourselves how we ever accomplished what we did."

The chill of the night seemed to be streaming out of the star-spangled sky, sending blasts of cold air down upon the earth.

"I don't know how our historians, sociologists, economists and other scholars will answer this question in the future. But this is the way I see it: we know about the first line of defense and the second, but I say there's a third line, too. And it's the main one. One which no enemy can ever overcome. It doesn't lie along our borders. This may sound exalted, but I'd say it passes through your heart and mine. And through the small, childish heart of that boy," Subbotin nodded in the direction of the wagon train. "And through that old, worn-out heart of Pankrat Nazarov. And of millions and millions of others. One day writers will write books, and poets will write poems and songs about it."

As Kruzhilin listened he was taken by the simplicity of what Subbotin was saying and, at the same time, the depth and complexity of the matters he was discussing.

"How are you getting along with Polipov?" Subbotin's question was unexpected. He sounded annoyed.

"It hasn't come to an open clash yet, but we've had several confrontations. I've been thinking about proposing he be transferred away from our district. I know he was the one to go slandering Nazarov. And we did have an

agreement about that."

"Listen, why don't you get down for a minute and cool your head in the snow?"

"You mean it wasn't him?" Kruzhilin pulled at the reins as if he really was going to get out.

"Supposing it was? What then?"

"I told you what! Either he leaves, or I will. I've been wanting to get released from my job so I can volunteer. After all, there's been a Central Committee decision about sending Communists to the front as political workers. I still know how to shoot. And if you won't let me go, I'll run off. Like Kirian Iniutin did."

"Why don't you do that? When you informed the Regional Committee about Iniutin we all had a good laugh. Everybody knows about kids running off to join the army, but this is the first time I've ever heard of a forty-year-old man running away from home. I imagine it'll be still more interesting when a fifty-year-old man tries it. Especially if he happens to be the Secretary of the District Party Committee."

"I know it sounds funny."

"It does. As for Polipov, no one will understand or support you if you start a fight with him now."

Kruzhilin snorted. "You sound just like Polipov. That's exactly what he said. He thinks he can scare me by saying that no one will understand or support me."

"I think you realize that Polipov isn't as dumb as he looks. When he alerted us as to what Nazarov was up to, it wasn't in the form of a stupid complaint. He simply reported the facts: the Chairman of the Red Wheat Collective Farm had sown most of his fields to rye without having consulted anyone, and Kruzhilin, Secretary of the District Committee, had not consulted anyone either, when he supported Nazarov, saying that he had sanctioned it as an experiment, to be conducted on one farm only. Polipov said that as a Communist and Chairman of the District Executive Committee he was not sure about whether such experiments should be conducted in wartime, when the situation in the country was so grave. He said he considered such an arbitrary ruling on the part of the Secretary of the District Committee to be incorrect,

but since he was doubtful about the matter, he wished the Regional Committee to advise him on the proper course of action. As you see, he seems to be accepting part of the blame. He seems to be saying: 'I don't know what to do. I'm at a loss as to what action is to be taken. I don't have the brains to figure it out for myself.' However, my colleagues at the Regional Committee all know that when Polipov had your job, Shantara District delivered more grain to the State than any other district in the region. They also know that I was the one who insisted he be removed from the job, because I knew for a fact that Polipov had driven the collective farms to the brink of disaster. I know, or, rather, I'm beginning to understand what sort of a man he really is. That's why I've been sent here now, to see what my protégé is up to."

"And what do you think? "

"I haven't formed any definite opinions as yet. That'll have to wait till next fall. What I mean is, I'll have to wait till then if I want to convince everyone it's more profitable to sow rye here. As Nazarov says, God willing, that is."

"And if He's not? "

"You mean Nazarov really did it on his own? "

"More or less. To tell you the truth, I was thinking about the district farms gradually going back to rye, but then the war broke out. The way Nazarov saw it was that there was no sense in wasting time by putting it off any longer. And he's right, Ivan Mikhailovich."

"Let's say I know he's right, too. I'll support Nazarov and you when the matter comes up at the Regional Committee and anyplace else. And I know I'll be successful, because ... because you're in good standing there now. The district fulfilled its grain delivery quota, and the plant has been put into operation. That'll all go onto one side of the scales. But if God's 'not willing' next summer, I want you to know that we'll be in trouble: you, me and Nazarov. Polipov'll be the only one who'll come out on top. Now do you see how far ahead he's planning? "

"Meaning that only God can save us from Polipov? "

Kruzhilin said sarcastically.

Subbotin was silent for so long that Kruzhilin was beginning to think he'd forgotten to reply. Finally, he said,

"There's a saying that's as old as the hills: a friend in need is a friend indeed. If we look closely, there are a lot of things that have come to the surface now. War, like nothing else, will show us who the real friends of Soviet power are, those who are indifferent to its fate, and those who are ... its enemies."

"Is that how you're putting it?" Kruzhilin could not hide the amazement in his voice.

"Yes," Subbotin said harshly. "Naturally, I have no one definite in mind, especially Polipov. I'm speaking theoretically. People will show their true colors in wartime. Any little flaw in a person's soul may turn into a festering sore under the pressures of wartime. Then again, the war might heal it over if it's only an insignificant part of a person's makeup. I think it was Maxim Gorky who said that in the end a human being carries out his human role in life."

The moon rose above Zvenigora, sending its pale light down upon the snow-covered cliffs.

"How am I to understand what you've said in respect to Polipov?"

No sooner had Kruzhilin spoken than he understood that Subbotin was annoyed by his question. He jerked his shoulder irritably and did not reply. Instead, he said unexpectedly,

"Have you had any word about your son at all?"

"No."

They said no more for the rest of the journey.

* * *

When Anton returned to the plant after accompanying Subbotin on his inspection tour he phoned his wife to say, "Ivan Mikhailovich sends his regards. He promised to drop in this evening."

"Oh, dear! There's not much for supper. Can you bring something home from the canteen?" Liza asked.

"All right," Anton smiled into the phone.

It was past 11 p.m., the table had been set for company, but Subbotin had not yet arrived. Liza had lain

down to rest. Anton paced up and down, glancing at his watch every so often. He was not worrying about Subbotin, however. He was worrying about his son, Yuri, who was due to start on the night shift at midnight but who still had not come home. He was out galivanting somewhere. Liza had said he had gone to a dance at the community center. Anton had frowned at her words, for he had passed the building on his way home, and all the windows had been dark. That meant there had been no dance or film showing that evening, or else, if there had been, it had ended long ago.

Liza had laid out Yuri's work clothes on a stool in the kitchen.

Of late, Anton had found himself worrying more and more about his son. He did not know when that feeling of anxiety had first begun to gnaw at him, back in Kharkov or during the great confusion in Lvov, in the last days of June. Perhaps it was some time later, when they had arrived in Shantara. Was there really any cause for anxiety? Anton was as yet unable to get to the bottom of it, as he was still unable to fully understand what had happened to himself. Beginning with his trip to Pere-myshl on that calm Saturday in June, followed by the terrible morning of June 22nd, when the war began, and all that happened until his last glimpse of Vasily Kruzhilin carrying the unconscious body of Maxim Nazarov and disappearing behind the charred remains of a village house.

It was like a terrible nightmare, but one he could not shake off. Time and again, whenever his mind was free to relax for a moment, these scenes would be revived in his mind's eye bringing back the horrors of those days as vividly as ever.

Now, as he paced up and down beside the table, he felt icy fingers gripping his heart. Liza seemed to be dozing. He glanced at his watch again. It was half-past eleven, and Yuri had still not returned. Where could that scoundrel be?

He had first called his son a scoundrel back in Lvov, when he had finally managed to reach it in a state of complete exhaustion on the morning of June 27th. As he walked along the streets he was stunned by the change in

the lovely, colorful city. When he had left Lvov on the morning of June 21st the sharp-roofed houses had seemed to be drifting in a fragrant pink haze. A heavy aroma had seeped through every one of the crooked, medieval lanes which the janitors had swept clean at dawn. Now the streets were covered with rubbish. The air was filled with acrid smoke. Black columns of smoke rose in thirty, or perhaps fifty, places to meet on high, blanketing the sky in a dense gray. The familiar rumbling of airplane motors was coming from somewhere above this heavy gray blanket, interspersed with the booming of explosions in the direction of the railroad station. The planes were bombing the station. Anton's heart lurched, for his house was in the vicinity of the station.

The streets, always so busy, were deserted now, all save the central thoroughfares, along which an endless stream of refugees on foot and in carts proceeded, oblivious to the sporadic rifle fire in the side streets and, for some reason or other, on the rooftops. The human streams were heading west, detouring around the railroad station.

"What's the shooting all about? Who's shooting?" Anton asked several people, but no one knew.

He passed the Restaurant George, the finest in Lvov. Its large plate glass windows were smashed. Splinters of glass crunched underfoot. Tree-lined Academicheskaya Street was also filled with refugees. Trucks, automobiles and peasant wagons piled high with household belongings were making their way along the left side of the street. Tanks and motorcycle troops were speeding along the right side of the street towards the western outskirts of the city. In danger of being run over by a tank, Anton dashed across the street and ran towards the Regional Party Committee headquarters.

The corridors were strewn with papers. Doors kept slamming as the staff rushed about, paying no attention to him. Anton was covered with dirt, unshaven, dressed in a filthy suit and a battered pair of boots. He entered the Secretary's office waving off the surprised girl who was tossing papers out of a safe and who blinked her mascara-beaded lashes at him in surprise.

The Regional Secretary was standing with his back to

the door, shouting into a telephone, refusing someone the use of some trucks. Then he turned and saw Savelyev.

"At last," he said. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep. There was a plate with a piece of a meatball on it set right on the papers on his desk. Beside it were two glasses half-filled with tea. "So you finally made it?" he said and went back to searching for something among the papers.

"Yes," Savelyev breathed, slumping into a green armchair. "How'd it happen? How could it have?"

"It did," the Secretary spoke sadly. "The Germans are about twenty-five kilometers from here. They keep bombing the railroad station, so that everything there is practically at a standstill. We're trying to repair the tracks between the bombing raids, but...."

"You say the Germans are still twenty-five kilometers from here? Then what's all the shooting about right in the city?"

"Groups of German saboteurs parachute into the city every night. We try to catch as many as we can, but it's very hard, because they're dressed in Red Army uniforms. Besides, the local cutthroats are running wild. To all intents and purposes the battle's being fought in the city right now."

"To all intents and purposes the city has already fallen," Savelyev said, and it was not clear whether he meant this as a question or as a statement of fact.

"The situation's critical," the Regional Secretary said, having finally found the paper he was hunting for. "It's all come down on us like an avalanche. The Germans were forty kilometers away only yesterday, and nobody can say where they'll be tomorrow. Trenches are being dug on the outskirts."

"Yes, I saw them."

"We've mobilized every able-bodied person we could for the job, mostly teenagers. Even if we only manage to hold up the German advance for a day, or a couple of hours, it'll still be worth the effort. Our main task now is to evacuate the population. Nothing else matters. However, panic has set in, and it's practically impossible to direct the fleeing crowds. All we've been able to do is post

traffic controllers at every crossroads to indicate the way to the refugees. You're to leave for Moscow immediately. Here," he concluded and held out a telegram.

"What for? "

"I don't know. We're still in touch with Moscow by phone. The People's Commissariat phoned about you twice. I want you to be ready to leave in an hour. I'll send our staff car for you. There's no other means of transportation available any longer. I don't think the station at Ternopol has been bombed yet. The car will take you to Ternopol. That's all. The car will be waiting outside your house in exactly an hour."

"Is the house still standing? " Anton asked, reaching for the telephone.

"Yes. And your family's all right. I just phoned to find out whether you'd returned or not. There's no time to lose. You'd better take your wife along, otherwise she'll never get out of the city."

Anton set out at a run. The closer he came to his house the more frequently he encountered bombed buildings. There were gaping holes in the walls and piles of rubble where three- and four-story buildings had stood. Flames and smoke were pouring out of many of the windows. Just a few days before these houses had been neat and attractive. It was impossible to believe that these were the same streets, that this was the same city.

A constant booming and the firing of ack-ack guns was coming from the railroad station. The guns seemed to be firing at random because no planes could be seen through the heavy smoke that covered the sky. The nazis, too, were bombing the station at random, dropping bombs stubbornly into the heart of the fire and smoke, preserving the rest of the doomed city, though intent on preventing a single train from leaving it.

Anton flew up the stairs to his third floor apartment and yanked open the door.

"Anton! " Liza cried, falling against him. She began to sob. "You're alive. You're alive! "

"It's all right, Liza. It's all right."

The rooms were topsy-turvy. Open suitcases were set on the beds and the table. Yura, dressed in his undershirt

and a pair of trousers, was walking over piles of clothing, picking out the best of what there was and shoving it into the suitcases.

"I'm all right, Liza." Anton held her off gently and went over to his son, removing his torn, filthy jacket on the way. "So you did manage to get here? Hello, Yuri. What're you doing?"

"They're giving you a car, so we can take the most necessary things," Yuri replied without interrupting his packing.

"How do you know about the car?" Anton shouted, although he did not yet understand the reason for this sudden distaste he felt for his son.

"Anton! Darling!" Liza cried, rushing towards him again. "Don't talk like that. The Secretary of the Regional Committee's been calling since yesterday, trying to find you. You've been summoned to Moscow. You can't imagine what I've lived through these past two nights. Yura said we should start packing, just in case. Where are the Germans now? They say they're very close. Is it true?"

"Wait a minute, Liza." He held her off again to face his son. "Have you been to the draft board?" At this he snatched a shirt that Yura was about to stuff into a suitcase from his hands. "Answer me!"

Yura merely shrugged. "I'm not from Lvov. And, besides, there's Mother."

"The nazis are twenty kilometers from here! Everybody's out digging trenches. You're of military age."

"All right," Yuri said softly, pulling on his shirt. "All right. But don't shout at me. I'm going to the draft board."

"No! No!" Liza screamed. She rushed over to stand in front of Yura, shielding him from Anton as from an enemy. Her eyes burned feverishly.

"Liza! You'll never forgive yourself for this."

"I don't care! I can't. He's all I have left in life, Anton! Either we all go to Moscow together, or you go alone."

"You and I are going! Do you understand? You and I. It's his duty to...."

"No! " she screamed, turning pale as she embraced her son. At that very moment her slim body jerked convulsively. She moaned and began slipping to the floor.

"Mama! Mama! " Yuri cried, catching her up.

"Liza! Liza..." Anton said helplessly, although he knew what had to be done in such a case.

"Hurry, Papa! " Yura lifted up his mother, strode over to the couch and kicked off the suitcase. Then he lay her down, snatched the bottle of medicine from his father's hand, poured some into a wineglass of water which his father also handed him, and forced it between her lips. Anton stood there helplessly, staring with grief at his wife's pale face that was now covered with a cold sweat.

A few moments later her eyelids twitched. She opened her eyes and said with difficulty, "Yura, darling.... We'll all leave together. Do you hear me, Anton? I know, I understand ... that it's wrong. But I can't... If I lose him, I'll die. Try to understand me, Anton..." Her chest rose and fell so rapidly it seemed that she was shuddering, not breathing.

"Yes, yes, all right. Try not to be so excited."

Every now and then the house trembled and the dishes clinked in the wake of ever new bombs that were falling on the station. Every now and then a siren would be heard and, strangely, the sound of locomotive whistles.

Anton stood by the couch for a few more moments and then went to the bathroom to wash and shave. He felt miserable. Everything in him cried out against making use of the car to whisk his son away, but he had no choice, because it really would kill Liza.

He did not reproach his wife, knowing only too well the source and reason for her boundless and, if the truth were to be told, blind, animal love for her son. In that now-distant and terrible year, 1918, Sviridov, the White-guard interrogator, had not spared six-year-old Yuri, either. Liza's mind had not been as affected by the tortures she had endured as by having had to witness her child being tormented.

Anton understood all this. But who would understand him if he sped his son away from this flaming city? Yura was no longer a child. He was a full-grown, healthy man who, according to every law of human conscience, should

have, was duty-bound to defend this city from the advancing enemy.

However, there was no time now to even think about it, for the car was due at any minute. In fact, it might have already arrived. Anton scraped his razor hastily over his cheeks and neck and then went back into the room.

"All right. Yuri's coming. Don't take much, only the bare necessities. If you want to know, Yuri, you've grown up to be a ... a real scoundrel."

Anton had first heard the word as a boy in Novonikolayevsk. His Aunt Ulyana had often called him a scoundrel when she had scolded him for getting into trouble. Now it came to mind of its own accord.

Yuri shrugged. "Depending on how you judge a person. I, personally, think I'm not a bad lathe-operator."

"Stop smirking! We'll see about it when we get to Moscow. At any rate, you'll report to the nearest draft board the minute we get there."

However, when they finally did reach Moscow after countless bombings on the way, Anton only managed to phone their hotel from the People's Commissariat to tell them the name of the farm-machinery plant which he was in charge of evacuating and shout into the phone to Yuri,

"I don't know whether the plant's being evacuated as far as the Volga or beyond it. There's a car downstairs waiting to take me to the airport. I'm leaving for the sight right now. Can you hear me, Yura?"

"Yes."

"Stay at the hotel till you hear from me. The people at the Commissariat know where you are. Take care of your mother. Understand?"

"Yes."

"We'll see about you later," Anton added, repeating what he had said as they were leaving Lvov.

Two weeks later he returned to Moscow, but only to leave again immediately. He phoned them from Siberia, telling them how they were to get to Shantara.

Yura really did go to the draft board the day they arrived without saying a word to his parents. That evening Grigoryev, the military commissar, phoned Anton to say, "Your son is a skilled lathe operator, isn't he?"

"Yes. So what? "

"Don't you need skilled workers at the plant? We've received orders to defer all skilled workers. But he's not on the staff there yet."

Anton glanced at his wife. She had not yet recovered from the long and difficult journey and was barely moving across the room. He sighed, and after a moment's hesitation said, "He will be as of tomorrow."

Anton felt as though he had become a party to something disgusting.

* * *

He glanced at his watch again. It was twenty to twelve. At that very moment the door burst open and Yura rushed into the room. His jacket was unbuttoned, his cap was askew and his face looked creased and slightly swollen.

"Ma! " he shouted from the threshold. "I'm late! Where are my clothes? "

Liza sat up quickly, wakened by his shout. "Goodness! You're late! What'll you do? You haven't had any supper."

"Never mind. Make me a sandwich to take along." He splashed some water on his face at the kitchen sink.

Anton came into the kitchen and stood looking at his son for a few moments. "Where were you? "

"No place special. I went to the dance," Yuri replied as he picked up a towel.

"Don't lie! You're lying! "

"What's the matter, Anton? " Liza asked anxiously.

"Wait a minute, Liza. Why are you lying, Yura? When'd you learn to lie? You were sleeping someplace. Look at your face! "

Yura was now hanging the towel up on a nail. "All right. Supposing I am lying," he said calmly. "And I really was sleeping. Say, at my friend's house."

"Don't lie! " Anton shouted again. "You ... you were sleeping at some woman's place, you scoundrel! "

"Anton...."

"What? I said, wait a minute."

"Yes, wait a minute, Mama." Yura came up close to his father. His green eyes flashed as savagely as a wildcat's. Anton was astounded. However, the ferocious glitter was gone in a flash. It had melted away. Once again the Yura he knew so well, a mild-mannered, obedient son, stood before him, making Anton wonder whether he had not imagined the expression he had never seen before. "What's all the fuss about, Papa?" He smiled guiltily. "All right. Say I was with a woman. What of it? I'm not a baby."

"You bastard!" Anton was trembling. His mouth twitched quite like Polipov's always did.

"All right, Papa. There's no time for this now. I've only got ten minutes left!" Yura snatched the package his mother had prepared and dashed out.

Anton sank down onto a chair. He pressed his hands to his temples. Liza came up to him softly and touched his shoulder.

"Why'd you talk to him like that? He really is grown up."

"Indeed! But what has he grown up to be? Can't you see he's lying and cheating? If he wants a woman he should get married! That's what any decent man would do. But he.... Can't you see that there's something rotten inside of him?" He jumped up and started pacing. "So what has he grown up to be? And what else can we expect of him in the future?"

Liza sobbed. "I know, Anton. I know I'm to blame. It's all this terrible love I have for him. My mind tells me I'm wrong, but I can't change. He's my only child, the first and the last. This probably wouldn't have happened if I could have had another child. But they beat me so, they hit me in the stomach. Try to understand me." She sobbed.

"All right. All right. Don't cry." Anton was not a milksop. He was not a weakling, but, as always, he became helpless at the sight of his wife's tears. Was this because of his love for her? And he did love her as fervently as ever. Or was it because he could never forget the tortures she had endured? She had become an invalid as a result, so that the least excitement or worry caused her to take to her bed. He tried not to worry her, and always gave in to

her. Perhaps it was both of these reasons. Still and all, he understood it was not to his credit and, objectively speaking, he, too, was to blame for the kind of person Yura had become. At first, perhaps, Anton had not noticed some trait which he should have. Then, noticing some fault of his son's, he would nevertheless give in to his wife, until now it was too late to change anything. It was probably impossible anyway, for Yura's expression had been so fierce in that fleeting moment.

"Hello! Anybody home?" someone called from the doorway.

Neither Anton nor Liza had heard Subbotin enter. Now, at the sight of the weeping Liza, he felt very awkward and said,

"I'm sorry. I've come at the wrong time."

"Ivan Mikhailovich!" she exclaimed and rushed to embrace him, her dead father's old friend.

"Let's have a look at you, Liza. I haven't seen you in years. Why, you're just as beautiful as you were when you were a girl."

"I'm so glad to see you. It's been so long! "

"I am, too, Liza. So life has brought us together again. Why were you crying? Was it because of Anton? We all know what a monster he is."

"No. Anton's very good to me. It was just...." she looked embarrassed. "What are we standing around for? Take off your coat. Supper's ready. And we won't let you go. You're spending the night with us. Take his coat, Anton." She hurried back into the room.

Ivan Mikhailovich took off his coat and combed his thinning hair. "Pardon me for butting in, but why was she crying?"

"On account of our son. He's been causing me a lot of worry."

"I see. Yes, children are sometimes very hard to understand."

"I know. You can wash your hands here. How was the trip to the collective farm?"

"Not bad, on the whole. The chairman's an interesting fellow," Subbotin said as he held his hands under the water. "There's still something of the brigand in him. He

went and ordered most of the farm fields sown to rye. To tell you the truth, it's sometimes useful to be a brigand in our times. That's one way to get fast results."

"How long will you be here? And when will you come to the plant?" Anton asked, handing him a towel.

"I'll stay on a while longer, and I'll come over to the plant again, but I've been transferred to agriculture again."

"I see. Which means you're not my chief any more."

"That's right. Are you sorry?"

"No, I'm happy. That means I can have a drink with you without worrying about people saying I'm trying to get into your good graces."

"You mean it did worry you?"

"Quite a bit."

They laughed and went into the room together.

* * *

At the end of a day at the office Polipov followed a routine he had adhered to for years: he checked to make sure there were no papers lying around on his desk for curious eyes to see, locked his desk and tried the handle of the safe in the corner. Then he picked up his briefcase. But today, instead of leaving the office and going home, he sat down in the armchair reserved for visitors, closed his eyes and gave himself up to his thoughts.

During the past few days the thought uppermost in his mind concerned Subbotin. The Secretary of the Regional Committee had been in Shantara for a week, visiting the outlying collective farms with Kruzhilin, but not once had he stopped by the District Executive Committee, nor had he as much as mentioned the letter Polipov had written to the Regional Committee. Polipov had not questioned him about the matter, either. Subbotin greeted him noncommittally on the rare occasions when they did meet, and he would nod in reply, after which they would each go their separate way.

Yet, Subbotin had arrived in connection with his letter, and Polipov was certain of this. What kind of a surprise was Subbotin preparing for him? Would he call a

meeting of the District Committee to say that Polipov's complaint about the Secretary of the District Committee was not an objective one? However, he was nobody's fool to write complaints. His was simply a letter written by a Party member to a higher-standing Party body, requesting that a certain matter be made clear to him. Indeed, it was most inopportune to have had Subbotin transferred back to agricultural affairs. The former Secretary in charge of agriculture would have brought Kruzhilin, not Polipov, to account for Nazarov's doings. And he would have done it in such a way as to make Kruzhilin remember it for a long time to come. This would have been an ace up Polipov's sleeve, something he would have kept there for a rainy day. But who could have known that things would turn out as they had?

Actually, Kruzhilin always seemed to be in luck. That fall things had appeared to be going very poorly at the plant's construction site, and the district was lagging behind in its grain deliveries. At the time Polipov (here he smiled sourly to himself although his face retained an expression of concentrated thought) did not exert any pressure on the farms to speed up the harvesting and looked the other way, although on most of the farms the harvesting was proceeding twice as slowly as it could have if things had been organized more efficiently. He had zoomed around from one farm to another, making a fuss about the threshing and grain deliveries, demanding that every truck, car, wagon, cart and horse be mobilized.

"The fall winds'll start blowing soon, and they'll bring rain. And then the grain'll be blown out of the ears," his wife Polina said to him one day as she sat reading the district newspaper. "That'll put Kruzhilin on the spot. And then, even if he turns himself inside-out, he won't have any grain to deliver to the State. And if it starts snowing before all the harvest is in..."

"Shut up! " Polipov shouted in a rage, for, as always, she had guessed his secret thoughts. "What're you saying? What're you accusing me of? Your head's full of wild ideas! "

Naturally, it would have been ideal if the plant had not been put into operation for another month of two and the

harvest had failed. The top executive was always held responsible in such cases, and Kruzhilin would have flown out of the District Committee like a cork out of a bottle, clearing the way for him, Polipov. But then Savelyev and Nechayev, the chief engineer, a man as skinny as a bean-pole, had arrived. Two weeks later the plant was producing shells. As a result, the Regional Committee and the People's Commissariat of Ammunition had sent the men congratulatory telegrams. Now Kruzhilin had personally become involved with the harvesting. Unlike Polipov, he was paying no attention to grain deliveries, putting the main stress on harvesting as much as possible now and stacking the grain. Grain deliveries in the district had fallen sharply. There were thunderous calls and telegrams from the Regional Committee. Kruzhilin hardly paid attention to them, while Polipov, on the contrary, did, and it only made him gloomier still. (At this point Polipov smiled wryly once again, but this time openly. The grimace on his broad face made it seem as if he had had something very sour in his mouth.) Indeed, he was becoming ever more depressed, because he knew the day was not far off when the Regional Committee would congratulate the district for having fulfilled its grain delivery quota, and then all those angry telegrams would turn into a heap of useless paper. Besides, nature seemed to have been in conspiracy with Kruzhilin: it was an unusually long, dry, sunny autumn.

That was exactly how everything had turned out. As a result, not a single one of the traps which Polipov had set under Kruzhilin had been sprung. They had all gone slack. They had not shaken Kruzhilin's position in the least. What else could Polipov resort to? Only Nazarov, whose willful action had become known to him too late in the game. Still and all, after some thought Polipov had written his letter, bearing in mind the old proverb that words written with a pen could not be hacked out with an axe. He had written the letter at night in his office, at this very desk, philosophizing about life being fleeting and changeable. Circumstances might unexpectedly bring his letter to mind at an opportune moment and would thus, perhaps, be to his advantage some day.

There was a knock at the door. It brought Polipov out

of his reverie with a jolt.

"Come in. Who is it? "

Subbotin entered. "Hello. I see I'm interrupting your thoughts, but I'm leaving now, and I stopped by to say goodbye." He took off his cap, but not his coat.

"Thank you kindly," Polipov replied and smiled wryly. "I didn't expect you."

"Why not? It's my duty to discuss the matter with you since you wrote to request that Nazarov and Kruzhihin's actions be explained to you."

Polipov raised his blond eyebrows and said, "All right. Go ahead."

Subbotin took the armchair opposite. They were separated by a narrow table set at a right angle to Polipov's large desk. Subbotin placed his hands on the worn green baize and interlaced his bony fingers. "Can you tell me honestly why you wrote that letter, Pyotr? "

"That's a funny question."

"Perhaps it would be, if I were to ask it of someone else. But you and I once faced the same dangers in Novonikolayevsk. As political prisoners we were in the same tsarist jails. I'd like you to tell me as your elder comrade."

"You know that yourself. I'm a Communist, Ivan Mikhailovich. Comrade Stalin and our Party teach us to be men of high principles. In this instance we're faced with flagrant wilfulness."

"I asked you to speak to me honestly, as one comrade to another," Subbotin said, wincing.

"And aren't I being honest? "

It was close to nine and pitch dark outside. Two large bulbs encased in cheap glass shades were burning brightly. Outside, illuminated by the light from the window, were bare, snow-covered young poplars and maples. In summer, when they were covered with leaves, they waved playfully in the windows, but now the impression they produced was unpleasant, for their dry, frozen branches stretched eerily from the blackness of the night towards the panes.

"I see we won't be able to talk this over as comrades, Polipov," Subbotin said drily and rose. "That's a shame."

"Naturally, it's difficult for me to talk to you, since, thanks to you, so to speak, I was relieved of or, rather,

barred from Party work," Polipov said, not trying to disguise the affront he felt. The corners of his large mouth drooped, quite as if he were going to cry. However, he continued in the same tone of voice, "First, I was transferred here from the city, as if I were being exiled. Then I was thrown out of the District Party Committee. I don't know what the next move'll be. Kruzhilin hinted that it might be to a collective farm. It all follows logically.'

Subbotin gazed at him with regret, pity and an obvious trace of disgust. "You say you've been thrown out and into exile? Ah, Polipov, Polipov. That's why I wanted to speak to you as your elder comrade, man-to-man. I wanted to try to really understand you and, perhaps, to help you, so that, as you put it, you won't be thrown any farther. So that you don't slide all the way down to the bottom of a chasm."

"Oho! " Polipov's pale brows inched upward. "So that's how the question now stands? "

"What did you expect? " Subbotin uttered the words with regret. He took a step towards Polipov, and it seemed he wanted to put his hands on the younger man's shoulders but then changed his mind. "While you were in Novosibirsk you turned into a Party bureaucrat of the worst kind. I thought then that working here in the district, in the thick of things, would cure you and set your brains right. But you...."

"What about me? " Polipov also rose and began pacing up and down. "Do you think I've made a mess of things? Then what do you call not making a mess of things? While I was in charge the district became one of the best in deliveries of grain, meat and wool to the State."

"Wait a minute! "

"No, I won't! " Polipov shouted in a rage, as if this were not the Secretary of the Regional Party Committee but a chairman or team-leader of one of the collective farms with whom he was wont to speak in just such a manner. "I won't wait, because there are opinions, and there are also hard facts."

"Whose district delivered the most grain and was the first to do so in the region? Polipov's. And what about milk and meat? Polipov's again! Which district is up

on the regional Honor Roll? Polipov's."

Subbotin stared at him in amazement which then changed to his former pitying glance. He sat down again, and the moment he did Polipov stopped speaking.

"Forgive me," Polipov mumbled and also sat down.

There was silence for a minute or two.

"Well, Pyotr Petrovich," Subbotin finally said with a heavy heart, "now the meaning of your letter has finally become clear to me. I was still doubtful. I hoped, or wanted to believe, that you were sincere, that you were simply mistaken, and that there was something that you really did not understand."

"There's one thing I understand, and that's that no good will ever come of willful actions like Nazarov's."

"In all the time you've been on the job here you've never acted willfully. Everything was within the law, according to the letter of the law. And you brought the district to the very brink of poverty. That's why you were removed from your post, because the situation could not be tolerated any longer. All your influential friends in the Regional Committee saw beyond the fancy sign of, as you call it, your district. And I think you know this perfectly well."

"Is there really need to use words like 'poverty' and 'brink'? Naturally, there were shortcomings in my district, like there are in any other District Party Secretary's. You exaggerated them and presented them in a slanted light at the Regional Committee. I'm not a baby. I know how those things are done. But I also know that time marches on."

"What do you mean? "

"I mean that Communists who joined the Party before the Revolution are held in esteem by the Party."

"Instead of basking in the light of former achievements you should take pride in present ones, which you should, but do not have."

"You say I don't, but I say I do. The only trouble is that you've buried them under a pile of trash. Never mind, though. We'll wait and see."

"One minute, now. What exactly are you waiting

for? ” Subbotin craned his skinny neck, as if he was afraid Polipov’s reply might escape him.

“As I said, time marches on. Besides, there’s a war on. Maybe you’ll be transferred away from Novosibirsk. Or maybe I’ll ask to be transferred to another region. If worst comes to worst....” Polipov hesitated for a moment, looked Subbotin straight in the eye and asked mockingly, “How old are you now? ”

Subbotin frowned.

“I can just wait till you go on pension.”

Silence descended upon the office again. The bare branches of the trees outside looked in through the windows dejectedly.

“I see you have it all figured out, down to the last dot.”

“I do,” Polipov said, making no effort to conceal his cynicism.

“I’ve had all sorts of thoughts about you, but I must confess, I’ve never seen you in your true light before. What’s come over you, Polipov? ” Subbotin asked sadly, as if he were asking himself that question.

“And how do I appear to you in this new light? ”

“It’s hard to pin it down. Things like intriguer, envier and careerist don’t really get to the heart of it. They’re all too superficial. They don’t really produce a true picture. I don’t know.” Subbotin rubbed his wrinkled cheeks wearily. “But as for the fact that you’ve not a drop of Party spirit left in you, that you’re not a Communist any more, that’s for certain.”

“I like that! ” Polipov laughed nervously. “Nobody can stop you from coming to any crazy conclusion you want to, but kindly keep it to yourself.”

“Perhaps you never were a Communist at heart,” Subbotin mused, ignoring Polipov’s nervous laugh and what he had said. “In fact, perhaps I still don’t see you in your true light, as you really, truly are. Hm? ”

Polipov threw back his large head awkwardly. His mouth was slightly agape, and the corner of his gaping mouth began to twitch as his puffy cheeks turned pale. “Why, you....” he croaked, choked, shook his head and jumped to his feet. He shouted, and the shout became a

scream, "Why you How dare you! How dare you! "

Subbotin rose with difficulty and straightened up. He spoke calmly, staring at Polipov's trembling cheeks, "I want you to know that we'll never let you get away with slandering Kruzhilin. We're going to invite him to the next meeting of the Regional Bureau to discuss the results of the harvesting and the situation at the plant and in the district. There are things to praise him for, things to criticize him about and some suggestions we can make. But, as you surely know, he will be mostly praised. As for Nazarov.... I think the Regional Committee will agree with me when I say that Kruzhilin, as the chief executive of the district, had a right, in the interests of the economy, to permit one collective farm to sow half its fields to rye on an experimental basis. Goodbye." He left the office without looking back.

Polipov returned home as enraged as a tiger and as frightened as a hare that has been pursued by hounds all day. His wife was some time in opening the door, and he stood on the porch, kicking at it savagely.

"What's the matter? Were you sleeping again? Hiding behind all those padlocks like some fair damsel! "

"There were so many shady characters here before the war, and now...."

"Who the hell'd ever look at you twice, you old hag? " He stomped off into the small, dimly lit room.

* * *

After Kruzhilin's arrival in Shantara, Polipov had demonstratively moved out of the District Committee's house and into a two-room cottage adjacent to the District Executive Committee building.

The Polipovs had no children (Polina did not know whether she or her husband was to blame and was too embarrassed to consult a doctor about this), and so her time was occupied by her household duties. She was a good housekeeper, and since her chores did not take up too much time, she spent the long winter days wandering around the house or lying on a couch, reading. In summer

she spent her time growing flowers. That is why her former house, now occupied by Kruzhilin and his family, and this cottage were surrounded by beautiful flower beds.

In her youth Polina had been slim and lithe, despite her round hips and somewhat stooped shoulders. However, a life of leisure had made her spread out, although she was still fairly young, being fifteen years younger than her husband. Her hips were now padded with fat, straining the seams of her skirts, and her breasts hung loosely under her housecoat, like heavy blobs of dough. Her once-flat stomach now hung in folds, and she had a large double chin.

She was twenty-five when she married Polipov or, rather, made him marry her.

One autumn evening in 1930 the telephone rang in Polipov's apartment.

"I'm sorry to be bothering you. My name is Polina Sviridova. I'd like to see you."

"Sviridova? What is it you want to see me about?"

"I wanted to go to your office, but didn't have the nerve to. My mother died last week. I'm all alone now."

"I don't understand. How do you expect me to help you?"

"I'm not calling for help," she said and sighed into the receiver. "I wanted to talk to you about my father. You knew him."

"I'm s-orry," Polipov stammered. "I never knew anyone named Sviridov."

"You and he were in prison together in Novonikolayevsk. That was very long ago. You may have forgotten."

Polipov gripped the receiver so hard his knuckles turned white. He said nothing for so long that the girl or woman at the other end spoke up.

"Hello? Why don't you say something?"

"Yes, yes...." he said, as if someone were striking him at each word. "I think I do recall him. Yes, Sergei Sviridov. We were in the same cell in the former Novonikolayevsk prison. I think that was back in 1906. So what is it you want?"

"I said I wanted to see you."

"Oh, yes. Well, drop in ... someday."

"If you don't mind, I'll come right over," she said and hung up without waiting for a reply.

The year before that Polipov had been demobilized and, after some hesitation, had returned to his native city which he had left eleven years before. He was taken on as a department head at the Regional Party Committee. He was single and lived in a two-room apartment whose windows faced on the Ob River and the railroad bridge across it.

Having replaced the receiver, he put on an apron, tidied up a bit, dusted the windowsills and carried some dirty dishes out to the kitchen.

He was still washing them when he heard a cautious knock at the door. He opened it to find a pleasant-looking woman wearing a simple jacket buttoned up to her neck. She had attractive eyes, and honey-blond hair combed back and twisted into a heavy bun that seemed to be pulling her head back slightly.

"It's me," she said shyly.

"Come in."

She sat down on the small, leather-covered divan, with her knees pressed closely together, and tears began to stream down her face. She took a handkerchief from her large black bag and pressed it to her attractive eyes. Her shoulders heaved and her skirt rode up, baring her knees and then half of her plump thighs. Polipov stared at them and wondered uneasily how she had discovered that he and her father had been in prison together. However, Sviridov might have mentioned the fact to her mother, or even to her, when he had dropped by at the Sviridov house on several occasions in 1918. Could she have remembered that he had been there? What did she know of his relationship with her father? And what did she want of him now?

"Don't cry," he said absently. "Pardon me, but what did you say your name was?"

"Polina," she sniffled. "I'm sorry. I know my father ... was a revolutionary in the beginning. He was one of your colleagues. And then ... he changed his views and went over to the side of the enemies of the Revolution. I'm not trying to defend him. But I'm sorry for him. And I wondered whether you might be able to tell me more about

him. My mother said he shot himself. Why did he shoot himself? ”

“That’s something I have no way of knowing.”

“Yes, of course....” She rose. Suddenly, her eyes seemed to become glazed, and her expression became stupid and helpless. She snatched his hand and pressed it between her hot palms. He could feel her fingers trembling.

“What the hell! Did she come here to seduce me?” the thought flashed through his mind. It would not have been hard to do, for he had not been alone with a woman in ages, there was no one else in the apartment, and the scent of her body and of her strong, cheap perfume made his head swim. He would have probably succumbed, if not for the single hammering thought: did she, or did she not, remember his coming to see her father when Sviridov was an investigator in the Whiteguard Czech security service? Did she, or did she not?

He yanked his hand away. Her helpless, stupid look was gone in a flash. Instead, a lively sparkle, a derisive little flame began to flicker in her eyes, gripping Polipov in a paroxysm of fear.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. “I’ll go now. I think my hair got mussed. May I comb it? ”

The mocking expression was gone now, too, but something of a predatory nature touched the corner of her mouth, and her sharp little nose twitched. However, this was very fleeting and dissolved in a simple, shy, timorous smile. The changes were so swift that Polipov did not know what to make of it all.

“Yes, of course. The bathroom’s over there. Perhaps you’d like to wash your face.” He went out to the kitchen.

From there he heard her cross the room and look into the bedroom, for the bedroom door squeaked. Then he heard the water running in the bathroom, after which his strange visitor crossed the room again. Then the bedroom door squeaked once more and all was still. “She’s either a hussy, or....” His heart was thumping anxiously, but he did not have the courage to look out of the kitchen and see what she was doing.

At last, he did. There was no one in the room. The

bedroom door was ajar. There was no light in the bedroom.

"Listen, child," he said, speaking with difficulty. "Don't you think you're being rather forward and improper? I did not permit you to go in there. The room is a bit messy."

No sound came from the bedroom.

"Polina? "

Not a sound, not a rustle. "What the hell! Maybe she's gone? " Polipov looked into the small foyer. There was no one there. His heart pounded as he pushed open the bedroom door and crossed the threshold. He was immediately struck by the now-familiar scent of strong perfume, and two arms embraced his neck.

"Wait.... What're you doing? " His voice was strangled as he tried to push away her hot body.

"Pyotr Petrovich ... Petya...." her lips sought his eagerly. "I know, it's forward and improper of me. But I couldn't stand it any longer. I love you. Ever since you came back. When I first saw you But I didn't know how And today I made up my mind. And I came here.... "

"Stop it! " He jerked his head away. He was trembling.

She suddenly seemed afraid, and moved swiftly to the far wall. Then, raising her arms, she rushed at him and pushed him onto the bed. "Aren't you a man? "

He fell on his back, and her long, fragrant hair covered his face.

Later, they lay on the bed in silence, as if trying to comprehend what had happened. Neither of them could speak first.

"So you really ... love me? " Polipov was ashamed of the sound of his voice.

"I said I did," she replied calmly.

"But if someone loves another person things don't happen like this. This was lewd. It's all wrong."

"But it's for sure," she murmured sarcastically. "I had my way after all."

He sat up quickly. "And do you often use such methods of ... seduction? "

"No," she drawled, as if calming his fears.

He lay back, and after a while he asked, "But why did you pick me? "

"Whom else should I marry, if not my father's friend? " She seemed surprised by his question.

"You mean ... You want me to marry you? " He had raised his voice and sat up again. "I was no friend of his."

"This is it. I've had it! " the words hammered inside his head. "I knew I never should've come back here after getting out of the army." Out loud he said, "But why'd you pick me to be your husband? "

"I want to have a decent life," she said slowly. "I'm all alone now. My mother really did die. I have no skills. I didn't even try to get a job. Mother and I lived like two mice all these years, hiding in our burrow, forgotten by everyone. We were always afraid we might come to somebody's attention, that someone would begin to wonder who we were. So you see the kind of heritage my father left us. And now Mother died. But I'll be Polina Polipova. I'll finally be able to breathe easily."

"It seems to me you forgot to ask me whether I'll agree to this. And I'm not at all sure that I will," he seethed.

However, she was unperturbed by his anger. She lay on her back as before, with her hair flowing over the pillow, and continued unhurriedly.

"Do you want to know why I picked you? Because you're lucky and you're smart. I think you'll go far. My father's dead and buried long ago. I don't even know where he was buried. Like he was a dog or something. But you came out clean. You're even a big man now. I know you worked with my father, betraying Bolsheviks."

Polipov's body jerked. Now, for the third time, he sat up swiftly. "What? " His eyes were ready to pop. He shouted as loud as he could, but could not hear his own voice and did not realize that he had lost it, that the only sound that escaped his constricted throat was a whisper. "Whom ... did I betray? Which Bolsheviks? You must be insane! "

She slowly pulled a bare arm from under the blanket. Her sharp nails dug into his shoulder through his shirt, and she said as she pulled him down beside her forcefully, "Lie

still. I didn't pick you myself. I didn't have the brains to. My mother's former lover told me to."

"What? Which lover?"

"Arnold Mikhailovich Lakhnovsky. The former inspector of the Tomsk gendarmerie. You haven't forgotten him, have you? He's even smarter than you. He's a big man now. He lives in Moscow. Is there anything else you want to know?"

Polipov said no more. He was short of breath. He opened his dry mouth and panted like a lathered horse. His broad forehead was covered with large drops of perspiration.

* * *

Polipov went through to his room, which was his study, tossed his briefcase onto the desk and fell full length on the couch in his coat. The springs creaked pitifully. The sound was probably that last dipper of cold water splashed upon the red-hot stones of a bathhouse after which a person there might drop dead, suffocated by the dry steam that burned one's entrails. To top it all, Polina had followed him into the study.

"Get out of here!" he roared, jumped to his feet, got hold of her soft shoulders and shoved her out of the room. He ran over to the casement window and jerked open first one half and then the other.

The cold air cooled his head somewhat. He stood by the open window for about ten minutes, then closed it and lay down again, staring at the ceiling for half an hour or more, closing his eyes occasionally, as if dozing off. His brow would become furrowed and then smooth again.

"Will you have supper now, Petya?" Polina inquired from behind the closed door.

He did not reply.

She opened it softly and slipped into the room. Tucking the hem of her long silk housecoat under her, she sat down on the edge of the couch and put her hand on his hot forehead.

"What's the matter? Did you have another fight with Kruzhilin?"



"No, I had a talk with Subbotin. No holds barred. With all our cards on the table."

"No! " Polina's plucked eyebrows flew up.

"Don't you understand, it was something that had to happen sooner or later."

"I know. But still. Even if your chief likes you, it never pays to show him your hand. Especially if he happens to be Subbotin."

"He knows it anyway," he said and made a face.

Polina's eyes slipped over her husband's puffy, creased face and short-legged body. The corners of her large pink lips turned down squeamishly, but she became frightened by this and quickly brought her hand up over her mouth.

"In a word, my dear Polina, things could not be much worse than they are. I can't get at Kruzhilin barehanded now. And I think Subbotin has me backed up into a corner pretty neatly."

"Remember, Petya, I said you should get around Kruzhilin carefully, and not the way you were going at it? You should've sicced Yakov Aleinikov on him, as you did when you wanted to get those other three men out of your way. I mean Baulin, Koshkin and Zasukhin." She was examining her manicured nails as she spoke. "All the more so, since Kruzhilin and Aleinikov had a spat over something once already."

"Don't you tell me what to do! " He swung his legs over the side of the couch. "Those three were enemies of the people! "

She snickered and was about to protest.

"Shut up! "

She nodded in assent. He seemed satisfied and heaved a sigh of relief.

"You're stupid, Polina," he said in a dull voice, avoiding her eyes. "Maybe those three weren't all that guilty. That's what the times were like then."

"Lakhnovsky writes that they haven't changed much."

"You and your Lakhnovsky! A lot you know! They haven't changed that much, but still.... What matters is that Aleinikov's changed. He can't even talk like a human being any more. He looks like he's ready to pounce at the slightest provocation."

"They say he's fooling around with the District Committee's typist."

"What's it to you? "

"Nothing. It's just that I'm a woman, and I'm curious. But you should...."

"I should what? That's all I need, to go poking my nose into another man's business."

"No, you don't have to poke your nose into anything. But it's something you should know. It's the kind of thing that might have very interesting consequences. If he intends to marry her, that's one thing, but as far as I know, he never got divorced. Besides, the typist has a boyfriend, or had one, at any rate. It can raise a lot of smoke. So much that Aleinikov won't be able to jump out of the fire without somebody's helping hand. And he'll be obliged to the one who offers him that hand. And he'll repay him in kind when the opportunity arises. Aleinikov is a man with a lot of power and authority."

"I see. And you mean Kruzhilin will be that opportunity?" Polipov's eyes, which bored through his wife, had narrowed to become slits.

"I'm just talking in general terms."

Polipov's hands went out menacingly, as if he was going to grab her by the throat. Instead, he gripped her shoulders and shook her so hard that the hairpins that held her heavy blond bun in place fell to the floor.

"Listen, Polina," he rasped, his hands still clutching her shoulders, "who do you and that Lakhnovsky of yours think I am? You still think I'm a bastard? "

"Petya! Petya! " She seemed genuinely frightened and broke free. "What did I say to offend you? "

"What did you say? " he repeated and advanced, forcing her back against the wall. He gripped her shoulders again and shook her so hard the back of her head hit against the wall. "What're you trying to make me do? And when'll you and that damn Trotskyite of yours Lakhnovsky stop telling me what to do? "

"Darling! " she was breathing hard, and her eyes filled with tears. She grasped his hands, pressed them to her flaming face and began to kiss them feverishly as her tears poured down upon them. She wept profusely, bitterly and

sincerely. Polina could always make her eyes stream at will, bringing forth as many tears as necessary.

"We've been married for over ten years, Polina, but you still treat me as if.... You keep trying to make me do things, as if I ... as if I were an enemy of the Soviet regime. But I never was. I know, when I was a boy I did a cowardly thing. I don't deny it. I wanted to save my own skin. But as soon as I got out of the clutches of your precious Lakhnovsky I never again betrayed my comrades in the Party. Not a single one." He stammered as he told her this lie, speaking with difficulty and slowly, searching for words, realizing full well that she knew he was lying.

Polina now stood by the dark window, braiding her hair slowly, looking out into the blackness beyond thoughtfully, but seeing nothing. As she listened to her husband she would nod slightly, as if to let him know that she believed him, realizing full well that he knew she was only pretending and that actually she did not believe a word he was saying.

"So you see, Polina, I'm not all that simple. I'm a complex man, apparently," Polipov was saying somewhat abashedly, experiencing a strange desire to keep on talking, unmindful of what he was saying. "I don't deny that in my youth I had my shortcomings. And now, too. Indeed, I'm vain. You know how it upset me to be transferred here to the district from the Regional Committee. I was still more furious when I was thrown out of the District Committee. Why'd they do that? You certainly know how hard I worked, never sparing myself. And the district was out in front all down the line. And then suddenly I was pushed into the background. Is that fair? Wouldn't anybody be offended? "

"Darling! " Polina hastened to his side.

"I'm a very open-hearted man, and I don't know how to conceal my hurt like others do, so that it's apparent to anyone," he continued. "Just as I can't conceal my dislike for Kruzhilin. Even though I realize that he's the least to blame ... for my misfortune. Do you understand me, dear? "

"Yes, certainly," she nodded quickly.

"Besides, when I see Kruzhilin making mistakes I can't

overlook them," he said in his usual voice, as if nothing were amiss. "Now you take the Nazarov case, for instance. I can't keep quiet about it. I can't cover up for him and his mistakes. No matter what my shortcomings are, my sense of Party principles has never died. That's the spirit I've been brought up in from the time I embarked on the life of a revolutionary in my early youth. And Subbotin was my mentor. Now he's the one who's called me an intriguer and envier. How little it takes today to turn facts upside-down, to give them another slant and slander an innocent man! But remember this, Polina. I won't go back on my principles in the future, either, but I'll never stoop so low as to take revenge on Kruzhilin in the dirty way you've been hinting at. You, or your Lakhnovsky! Hear me?" He gripped her shoulders again. "Understand?"

"Yes, of course," she replied, gazing into his eyes devotedly.

She had said "of course", although she might have said quite the opposite. For instance, she might have said that Polipov himself was an old hand at turning facts upside-down and giving them the slant he wished; that he himself could slander an innocent man without batting an eye, when it was to his advantage and, especially, necessary; that he had long since stooped to the filthiest kind of vengeance (thus, in '37 and '38, having followed the self-same Lakhnovsky's advice, he had, with Yakov Aleinikov's help, seen to it that Baulin, Koshkin and Zasukhin had been destroyed; and that, without batting an eye, he would do the same to Kruzhilin if he ever got the chance to do so.

There was much else she might have said, and he knew that she could but would not, for it was more convenient for both of them when she did not.

Everything about their marriage, emotions, words and actions, was false, and they both knew it. Polipov did not believe her now, as he had not believed her on that evening long ago when she had thrown herself upon him in his bedroom, murmuring incoherently of her love for him. She knew that he did not love her either, that he had never loved her and would never have married her had she not forced him to. But they both pretended to believe in the

sincerity of their emotions, words and actions, because this constant lie was apparently the only possible means to continue their relationship, the shell within which their coexistence was feasible. Within this shell they had learned to breathe, move, speak, laugh. In a word, they had learned to exist. If the shell were ever to crack they would have both been struck dumb and overwhelmed by the stream of fresh air that would have burst in upon them.

"Come, Petya. Supper's ready."

"All right. But just think of Subbotin. You know what that bastard said? He said I had no Party spirit left. And maybe never had any, to begin with."

Polina, who was on her way to the kitchen, stopped short. Her eyes grew wide with genuine fear.

"Can you imagine that? That bastard! Just think of it! And, besides, can you imagine what he'll be saying about me at the Regional Committee now?"

They ate in silence, trying not to look at each other, feeling nothing but disgust and alienation towards each other. This invariably happened whenever the conversation turned to the things it had that evening. As they lay in bed later, Polipov pressed his face against his wife's hot shoulder. After a long silence he suddenly said,

"How old is your Lakhnovsky now?"

"About seventy, I guess."

"They wiped out all the Trotskyites, but this one's managed to find himself a cozy nook. When the hell will he finally kick the bucket!"

For a while they lay in silence in the dark again.

"There's no way of getting at Kruzhilin now," Polipov said at last, crossing his arms under his head.

"What'll happen to us now, Petya? Subbotin really has you backed into a corner."

"Don't worry, I'll get out of it."

"How?"

"I don't know. Go to sleep. I don't know yet. That's what I'm thinking about."

* * *

The following morning Polipov got up early as usual. It was still dark outside, and the windows were covered with wet snow after the night's snowstorm.

"What'll we do now, Petya?" Polina repeated as they were having breakfast.

"It's not the happiest possible situation," Polipov said as he put some jam into his tea. He had a sweet tooth, and after adding four spoonfulls of jam to his tea he dropped in two lumps of sugar as well. "I thought I might ask to be transferred to another district. But I really don't know. They'll give me such a bad character reference that I'll never hear the end of it. It seems like Subbotin's stuck in my throat. I'll have to think of something else." He had a couple of sips and then said, "I'll ask to be sent to the front lines."

Polina's spoon clinked against the side of her glass.

"I don't see any better way out, dear. It'll be a clean cut. I'll be able to get rid of all the tags they've attached to me at a single blow. Then, after the war, I'll be as pure as the driven snow."

"The Germans are right outside of Moscow. Who knows how the war'll end?"

Polipov nearly dropped his glass, but managed to steady it with his other hand. However, the hot tea splashed onto his lap and he jumped up, kicking away the wicker chair. His face became red as he shouted, "Don't you dare! Hear me? Don't you dare!" His broad chest heaved. His knuckles turned white, and something Polina had never seen before flickered in his eyes. She had observed him in every possible mood and knew when he was lying for his own sake, and when it was for her. Looking at his suffused face, she could not understand whether his rage was sincere or whether he was putting on an act as usual. If he was, she wondered at the limits to which this man could go and whether there was actually anything sincere and honest deep down on the bottom of his soul. If there was it meant she had been wrong all these years, thinking that she could see through him, that she understood him. It meant he was indeed a much more complex

person than she imagined.

"Petya! "

"How could you? How can you say such a thing? Or even think...." He suddenly stopped speaking, as if what he had said and his excitement had caught him unawares. He raised his fists to his eyes, uncurled them and stared at his palms. Then he dropped his hands helplessly and seemed to go limp, as if some inner spring had been let loose and was now slack. He sank down on the couch, pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his brow and neck.

"What's the matter, Petya?" Polina touched his shoulder.

"I don't know. Leave me alone! " He sat there, leaning back, with his eyes closed. When he began to speak again it sounded as though each word he uttered caused him pain. "It's this way, Polina. I really am a bastard, like Subbotin said. I'm a careerist, an envier and an intriguer. If you want to know, I was responsible for having Baulin, Zasukhin and Koshkin arrested. I got rid of them, because they were in my way. In fact, I was afraid of them! One day, when the four of us were in my office, one of them said, 'How'd you ever manage to slip out of Sviridov's clutches back in 1918? How'd you manage to escape from the security prison? Who helped you get away?' I don't know whether they were simply asking for curiosity's sake, or whether they were beginning to suspect me. But I got scared. And I decided that in order to keep them from ever asking me that again.... To make it impossible for them to ask me again.... I know, I'm a bastard! I've been living a lie all these years, and you know it. Maybe I'll be like this till the end of my life. And I want you to know it. To know it! " he shouted, and it sounded like a bark. His legs jerked, as if he wanted to jump up but something was holding him back. "And so here's a man who's ugly both inside and out. You think I don't know it? But I'm a Russian, and I shudder at the thought of foreigners trampling our soil. Besides, I'm positive that the Germans, that fascist Germany, will never conquer Russia. Nobody ever will. So put that in your tea and drink it."

Polina went back to the table. She raised her apron to her eyes and sniffled.

"Stop it! "

"All right. All right," she agreed quickly, for she realized at last that her husband was like a stranger, that he had gotten the upper hand today, and that whatever she said had to be honest and in all seriousness. "All right. All right, Petya. But how'll I manage all by myself? Without you, without.... We don't have any savings to speak of."

"You'll manage. You can get a job."

"At the plant? Digging ditches and carrying bricks? Anything else? "

"You can get a job at the library. I'll help you to if I manage to get myself sent to the front. It shouldn't be too hard. And Subbotin'll help, I think. It's the best solution for us all. It's the only way we can get rid of each other."

He rose, went to his study to get his briefcase, and then put on his hat and coat. Polina saw him to the door and asked softly, as she fixed his scarf,

"Have you really decided to go off to war? "

"Yes. I have to." He put his hand on the latch, but before opening the door he said in a detached voice, "You know, Polina, I kept thinking about your father last night. He was right."

"I don't understand you. What was he right about? "

Polipov seemed to come to his senses with a start. "I know you don't. And you don't have to."

After he was gone Polina looked puzzled as she took in the room. It seemed to her that the man who had just been sitting at the table and on the couch was not her husband, Pyotr Petrovich Polipov, nor was the man who had put his hand on the latch, nor was the one who had just left the house. He was a complete stranger.

* * *

It was still night over Shantara. In the East, above Zvenigora, the sky was not as black. Tiny stars as small as specks of dust were gradually fading away in this lighter area. Polipov came out onto the porch, looked up at the dark sky and heaved a sigh of relief, as if could not have found his way to the office if it had been light.

However, he actually did appear to have lost his way in the dark, because instead of turning the corner of the house and going towards the gate between his yard and that of the Executive Committee building, he followed the snow-covered path to the street and trudged along it with his head drawn into his hunched shoulders.

A few minutes later he stopped outside the small house now occupied by Anton Savelyev and his family. But a short while before Polipov had helped them move in. He had even helped carry in the bundle of bedding fastened with a strap and the two suitcases, which comprised all of their belongings. Anton had been away on business in Novosibirsk when Liza and her son Yura had arrived.

"Make yourselves at home," Polipov had said, setting down a heavy suitcase. "I've done everything I could. Anton will be pleased. I know he's tired of living in a tent. I got the beds on loan from the local hotel. You'll have to return them as soon as you get your own."

"Thank you," Liza had replied. She had avoided Polipov's eyes. "You shouldn't have bothered about the beds. I'm sure they need them at the hotel. We'll manage."

"Mother!" Yura had exclaimed. "The hotel will make out. Thank you, Pyotr Petrovich. We're awfully grateful for the Government's concern for our well-being. Are there any outbuildings? I'll go have a look. We've decided to keep a cow, a pig, a dozen sheep, a chicken farm and a pair of carriage horses." He ran outside.

"Liza.... It doesn't seem possible, but we've met again," Polipov had said, taking a step towards her.

"It doesn't," she had replied drily. "I'm very grateful for all the trouble you've gone to. Please excuse me now. And thank you very much."

He had realized that she would rather wish he was gone and said ruefully, "I didn't think our meeting would be like this."

"I never expected to see you again."

"Liza! We grew up together. There's so much we have to talk about."

"Excuse me. I'm very tired after our long journey."

That was all she had said. After that they had only met twice by chance on the street. She had been the first to

nod hastily each time and then pass him quickly, her eyes on the ground.

The house had no front garden, so that the porch led right down to the street. To either side of the door was a shuttered window, with large cracks between the shutter boards. Light streamed through the cracks.

Polipov crossed the street, spotted a little bench beneath the branches of the trees now heavy with snow, sat down and gazed across at the Savelyevs' windows. What had brought him here, and why was he staring at the windows? Once, long ago, he had been in love with Liza, and he had thought his love to be true love and all-consuming. But then.... But then his love had died, just like a lake dies when its surface becomes covered over with green duckweed. Time, indeed, erases everything.

After he married Polina thoughts of Liza began to torment him. If he ever thought about Polina's father, his thoughts would immediately turn to Liza. He would imagine her as she had been in prison: exhausted, tormented, her long hair dishevelled, her body bruised and beaten, holding her shreds of a blouse across her breasts, which were also bruised. Thus he had last seen her in the White-guard Czech security prison, where Polina's father had been in charge. Liza had crawled across the floor, her fingers running over every plank and grasping at the air. She had whispered, "Yura ... my baby.... What have you done to my child?" That whisper seared his brain. He would thrust his head under his pillow to shake it off. Sometimes Polina would awake, and put her hand on his burning forehead.

"Why can't you sleep? Why are you thrashing around like a pig in a puddle?"

"I've had a very hard day. It's the strain of it."

"Do you want anything to soothe your nerves?"

"No. Never mind. I'll fall asleep."

In time, however, these recollections bothered him less and less, until they vanished completely.

Then Anton Savelyev had come back to Shantara, and Liza followed. When Polipov learned that the Savelyevs were coming, an eerie chill ran through him, but it had no sooner raised its head than it was gone. No one, not a

single soul except Polina and Lakhnovsky, who had miraculously escaped justice, knew anything about his past. Neither Polina nor Lakhnovsky, who was afraid of his own shadow, now presented any danger. Lakhnovsky had in his time been a rabid Trotskyite, but during the Trotskyite trials he had slipped out of Moscow and gone into hiding in a small town in the South of Russia. On very rare occasions Polina had received letters from him which bore neither a return address nor his last name. Each time she would destroy the letter as soon as she had read it.

"Are you sure he was your mother's lover? Are you sure he wasn't yours? You seem to be carrying on a lively correspondence," Polipov had once said half-seriously.

"Shame on you! I was still a child then. When we lived in Tomsk he and Mother...."

Polipov snickered and did not mention it again, although he recalled that she had been thirteen when he had come to their house in 1918, and he did not know for how long after that Lakhnovsky had stayed on in Siberia, nor where he had lived until he had moved to Moscow. However, it made no difference to him whether her mother had been his mistress or she had when she had gotten older, because he did not love Polina and never had. Still, he never regretted having married her. A man needed a wife, and although she was no beauty, this was compensated for in full by her silent ways and the convenience of having a woman in the house.

Polipov was more or less composed during his first encounter with Anton Savelyev, but he felt uneasy when he thought of Liza's arrival. He felt that just looking at her, just knowing she was there, would be a constant reminder, bringing back that terrible day of the torture and making his life a nightmare once again. But everything turned out contrary to his expectations. As he stood by the railroad car and glimpsed her tired eyes, a very ordinary pair of woman's eyes that glanced at him in surprise, then with curiosity and, finally, with understandable confusion and awkwardness took in the little station, he said to himself with a touch of regret, "Why did I always imagine them to be full of tears and pain, and wild? She has very ordinary eyes. And her son Yura's

turned out to be a hefty fellow. I'll bet he works out with dumb-bells every day. It's your nerves, Comrade Polipov, as Polina's father once said! "

True, he was alerted a moment later when she looked at him again, and the surprise of that first moment changed to animosity, glazing her eyes over icily. Her face became a mask.

On the two occasions when they later encountered each other, her eyes had had the same glassy look. Long ago in Novonikolayevsk, and especially in the years preceding the Revolution, Liza had never been too friendly. The icy glare had appeared every so often then.

"That's how it is," Polipov sighed as he sat on the snow-covered bench. "But what made me come here now? Why am I sitting here, staring at her windows? "

He was suddenly surprised and confused by his thoughts. It was as if someone else and not he were sitting on the bench, thinking about Anton Savelyev's wife.

Although the sky was getting light it was dark beneath the overhanging branches. The shuttered house and the other houses along the street whose windows were bright squares, seemed to be drifting away in the gloom of early morning, but all of this seemed light years away from Polipov.

"What the hell! " he said to himself sourly as he pulled his short neck into the raised fur collar of his coat. "What's been happening to me? Why've I done so many stupid things this fall? Why'd I raise that fuss about the grain deliveries? I wanted to get back at Kruzhilin. Even Polina noticed it. But that bitch notices everything. And then the Nazarov affair. And finally Subbotin. Why'd I have to be so frank? And why'd I let Polina in on it? Why'd I tell her about those three men? But she's not that dumb. She as good as knew, anyway. What a bastard I am. A bastard? "

The word, spoken to himself, was nonetheless like a whiplash. When, actually, had he sunk so low? As a young man he had been a very decent fellow. He recalled Subbotin having said, when speaking of him, "Our Pyotr is a reliable fellow. We could do with more like him." He had been proud of Subbotin's praise. He had been proud of himself.

That had been late in 1906. Polipov had been in prison for nearly a year after that, and was released late in 1907. Several months later Subbotin, having just escaped from a convoy as he was on his way to prison in Siberia, had shown up in Novonikolayevsk. Polipov, Anton and Liza, all of whom had been released from prison at about the same time, met Subbotin at a designated place and helped him slip into the city. A month later the gendarmerie investigator, Lakhnovsky, who had scared Polipov to death when he had threatened to put his lighted cigarette to his eye, had been able to trap him in a net of words. And Polipov had succumbed.

As he lay on the couch now, staring at the bare wall of his office, he tried to recall when he had left the bench across the street from the Savelyevs house. It had apparently not been too long ago, because it was still murky in his office, and the corners of the room were unpleasantly dark. He did not remember having come here. It was as if he had been transported from the bench to the Executive Committee in a trance.

Polipov crossed his arms under his head and realized that he had not suddenly become a bastard after that day Lakhnovsky had interrogated him but several days before. Indeed.

He had lain on the damp ground in the bushes all night, listening to Liza's and Anton's happy laughter, and to the sound of their kisses. And then.... He knew what was happening inside the little tent in the woods. He lay there, digging his nails into the grassy ground in a helpless rage. Then, unable to restrain himself any longer, he rose and went over to the tent, ready to pull it to pieces. What had stopped him? Something had. Perhaps it had been Liza's soft moan. He knew what it meant. Pressing his hands to his burning head, he had run off. The following morning there was to be a meeting of the underground City Committee of the RSDLP in the woods, held under guise of a wedding party for Anton and Liza. He was to be one of the first to arrive, since Subbotin had told him he'd be in charge of security. The very next day Anton and he were to go to Tomsk for machine parts and type for the underground printshop. That was when he had become a

bastard. But why? In the name of what? What had he paid such a terrible price for? Years had gone by. And what was Liza to him now? She was here in Shantara, so close. He had sat across from her windows all morning, but nothing had stirred in his heart, not a single heartstring had been touched.

Polipov sat up quickly. The rusty creaking of the couch springs grated on his nerves. He winced, rested his elbows on his plump knees and buried his face in his hands, feeling how hot his cheeks were. He had forgotten to shave, and Polina had not reminded him as she usually did.

Liza now meant nothing to him. But he had once loved her. God, how he had loved her! Lakhnovsky's burning cigarette had not tipped the scales towards treachery. His love had. He had hoped that Liza would tire of waiting for Anton. How stupid of him that had been! Now, from this great distance of years, he could see how terribly mistaken he had been, but not then. For some reason or other he had never dreamed that Liza would be so faithful to Anton, or that Anton would become such an expert at prison-breaks, becoming better at it than Subbotin. No sooner would Anton escape than Polipov would betray him. Several months would pass. Anton would again escape, and Polipov would again betray him. This state of affairs continued until the February revolution. In May 1918 Polipov betrayed him for the last time when he told Sviridov that Anton Savelyev would be at the railroad station in Novonikolayevsk on the day scheduled for the Whiteguard Czech uprising. Liza and Yura were to meet him there. They would journey on together to Tomsk.

Polipov was aware of the change in Liza's attitude towards him. Whenever they met she was aloof. At times this made him wonder uneasily about whether she had guessed what he was up to and the part he was playing in Anton's life. However, he would quickly brush aside his worries, for not a single soul except Lakhnovsky knew of this, and Sviridov was only informed of it on the eve of the Whiteguard Czech uprising. That was when Polipov felt that Liza's vague doubts, if she indeed had them, might somehow be borne out. Still, he went to her house a few

hours before she was to meet Anton's train and said, casting discretion to the winds,

"Don't go to Tomsk, Liza! "

"What do you mean? I'm going with Anton! " Her eyes were full of fear and surprise.

"I know, but still." Polipov was losing his self-control. "You have me to help you here, but there'll be nobody to stand up for you there."

"What're you saying, Pyotr? " Liza dropped the piece of clothing she was packing. "Soviet power's been established in Tomsk. You know that."

"What I mean is.... You have me here, and I'm a member of the revolutionary tribunal. And Tomsk is a strange city," he mumbled, feeling that he was giving himself away.

"I can't understand what you're getting at. You've always behaved so strangely. Every time Anton was arrested you tried to convince me he'd never come back." She sounded thoughtful. "And each time it was as if you knew what was going to happen to him better than anybody else. But he always came back."

"He escaped."

"That's right. No prison bars could keep him in. But every time he escaped the police discovered where he was. It was enough to make you think that somebody...."

"Don't you know I've been betraying him? " Polipov said with a nervous laugh and was horror-stricken at his own words.

"I've thought of that so many times! " Liza shouted.

"Thanks."

"And then I tortured myself for having thought such a thing was possible. And now, here you are again. And what you're saying is very strange."

"You always thought I was strange. But still, please don't go to Tomsk! Please."

"Why not? Tell me why not? "

"I c-can't! " he whispered, struggling not to tell her. "I don't know. These are troublous times. It's just a premonition. I'm worried, because I love you! I don't want to lose you." He raised his head to look at her. Liza was staring at him with dull eyes. Her face seemed turned to stone.

Polipov sat bolt upright. The couch springs creaked again. "When she got off the train here and looked at you her eyes were just as dull as they were then, and her face was like a mask again," an inner voice was saying.

He stood by the couch for a while and then replied, "To hell with her. She never knew the truth and she'll never find out now. If she'd been certain of it then, she'd have told Anton. It doesn't look like she has, thank God. And I couldn't care less about what her opinion of me is. Besides, I'll soon be leaving for active duty. No matter what. And we'll go our different ways. This time, I imagine, for good.

Part Three

THE GREAT OPPOSITION

The unexpected outbreak of war strangely altered Semyon's and Vera's relationship, drawing an invisible line between them which neither of them could, or would, cross. They rarely saw each other and apparently had nothing to say to each other. Since they both sensed this, they tried to part as soon as they met.

One evening, when Semyon had gone outside to have a smoke before going to bed, Vera called to him from beyond the fence.

"Oh. Hello." He went over to her.

"I've been standing here for ages, wondering whether you'd come out. How about going to the movies? We haven't been anyplace together for ages."

"All right," he said resignedly.

They walked to the community center in silence, saw the movie and returned in silence. Vera seemed to be lost in thought. In parting she suddenly embraced him and whispered,

"What about our wedding, Semyon? Remember, we were going to have it in the fall? And now it's fall. And there's a war on. You might be called up. Somebody said you even wanted to volunteer. Do you?"

"Is there anything else?" he said, moving away.

"What'll happen to me if we get married? What if I have a baby and you're away in the army?"

"Which means we shouldn't get married now. It's as simple as that." A now-familiar feeling of disgust made him push her away. Then she began to cry soundlessly. She wiped her tears and spoke in an undertone,

"I know what you're thinking. You think I want to get married, but I'm afraid to. Well, I am. I don't want to be a widow right after I get married. When you're in action any stray bullet can hit you."

"Shut up! What're you burying me for? "

"Don't be mad at me." She pressed her wet face against his chest. "I'm a girl, and that's the way a girl thinks. But I love you. I do."

That evening they had a long and difficult conversation. In the end, they agreed to put their wedding off until after the war. When this had been settled they both felt relieved, as if they had thrown off a heavy burden. Vera clung to Semyon again and said,

"I'll wait for you while you're away. And I'll be faithful to you. Even though I have to wait ten years."

This evening marked a new boundary of alienation between them, a chasm which was growing larger and larger. Semyon wondered at what she had said. She had said she would wait for him ten years if needs be, yet this had been nothing but words, because something had always been missing in their relationship, something very important. He could not now understand how they had once kissed and had even made plans to marry.

Then Kolya Iniutin told him that Aleinikov had come to their house to ask for Vera's hand. Semyon was not in the least perturbed by the news. He was merely surprised. He found it difficult to believe that Aleinikov, a sullen, moody man whose very appearance made everyone, including himself, shudder, was capable of asking for anyone's hand, let alone Vera's, who was thirty years younger than he. At any rate, Semyon had no desire whatever to have it out with her. "We'll see," he mused.

About three weeks later, as Semyon was hurrying to work one morning, he overtook Vera. She was walking along slowly, looking at the tall weeds protruding from the fences and that were now covered with hoarfrost. He greeted her. Vera's eyelashes fluttered. Her eyes grew wide.

"What's the matter? " Semyon said and was surprised at the undercurrent of bitterness and suspicion in his voice.

"What? "

"You look scared."

"That's because I didn't hear you coming."

The streets were still deserted. The sun was still far beyond the horizon, but the air was becoming warmer. The hoarfrost on the trees and the rooftops was beginning

to melt, and the branches were beginning to drip.

"You've forgotten all about me," she said, fixing her kerchief. "You could at least take me out once in a while. To the movies, or to a dance."

Semyon felt she was only saying it to say something, while actually she was pleased he had not been asking her for dates or pestering her. Once again he was overcome by a feeling of bitterness.

"I'm not up to going to dances. I've been assigned to the plant full-time now as a combination tractor driver and laborer, so that I'm dead-tired by the end of the day."

"I didn't know you were."

"Well, I am."

"Wait a minute. But that means.... It's a war plant, and that means you'll be deferred till the end of the war." She stopped to look at him.

"I've already been. But I'm going to keep on volunteering anyway. I've gone to my draft board twice, and I'll go again."

She lowered her eyes and walked on.

Old Yevsei was sweeping the yard outside the District Committee building. Spotting Vera and seeing that she was walking on, he stopped sweeping and called out,

"Polikarp Matveyevich is waiting for you. There's some kind of rush work."

"I'll be right back."

As soon as they had rounded the corner, Vera stopped, got hold of Semyon's lapels, stood up on tiptoe and pressed her cold lips against his cheek. "I'm glad we've met, even if it's just like this."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing? Kolya told me about Aleinikov and you."

Her thin brows arched, and the same rueful expression touched her face. "To hell with him! Wait till I tell you about it. You'll die laughing." No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she stopped short. Her face became covered with red blotches. Her hands dropped, and she took a step back.

For a moment Semyon could not understand what had come over her. He sensed that someone had turned the corner and was now standing behind them. Turning

around, he saw Aleinikov taking the two of them in, though his eyes were barely visible beneath the stiff visor of his cap.

"What do you want?" Semyon demanded.

"Nothing, actually. Pardon me. Hello, Vera."

She moved her lips, but no sound escaped them. By now her face was flaming.

"Pardon me," Aleinikov repeated and continued on his way.

"You said I'd die laughing?" Semyon said and stuck his fists into his pockets.

"Semyon! I didn't...."

"You're right. What a laugh." He turned on his heel and strode off, although he heard Vera hurrying along behind.

"Wait, Semyon! I can explain...."

"What's there to explain?"

She dropped behind.

"What's there to explain?" The question pounded in his head, arousing his indignation. However, when he drove his tractor out of the factory yard, pulling at the levers savagely, and then headed full speed towards the station, he suddenly wondered what he was so excited about. Why should he feel affronted? It wasn't Vera's fault if Aleinikov had suddenly gone crazy and wanted to marry her. They really should talk it over calmly.

That very evening he went out into his yard and shouted to Kolya who was hanging around in the street, "Go call your sister for me!"

"You don't say? Well, she's not home. She never gets home before midnight. Understand? Since you want to know."

Semyon felt as if he had been lashed. So that was why Vera had looked so scared. So that was why her sloe eyes had darted frantically when Aleinikov had come up behind him. Why, she was just pulling the wool over his eyes! She had been the one to tell him they should postpone their wedding till after the war. She just wanted to jilt him.

Semyon forgot all about the way he had tried to avoid her for weeks and about how relieved he had been when she had spoken nervously of putting off their wedding. He

was now overcome by rage and hurt. Feeling himself thus humiliated, he ran off to the District Committee building, although he could not have given himself an account of his own intentions.

There was a single light on in the second-story window of Vera's tiny office. He panted as he stared at the pale yellow square and then leaned against the fence of Kruzhihin's house for support. His back slipped down the rough boards and he sank to the ground.

His breathing gradually returned to normal and with it his hurt and indignation were dispelled, all save a pricking deep inside his heart. It was a feeling of sadness and regret over a dream or hope that was not to be. When he had first fallen in love with Vera he had believed that the vague stirrings and hopes of his schooldays were coming true. There were days, weeks and months on end when he walked around in a daze. At night he would visualize Vera's mysterious, laughing sloe eyes, her bosom which rose and fell so sharply and her strong, well-shaped legs. She was lithe, attractive and unattainable.

He soon discovered that she was quite accessible. He could stroke her soft, curly hair or kiss her eyes at will. At first, this evoked a storm of glowing emotions, but he soon found that he could just as easily unbutton her blouse and run his hand over her nude body, just like a Gypsy would run his hands over a horse's body that was for sale in the market place.

Vera would stand there as still as a horse. Slight shivers would run through her body and she would whisper, "Oh, Semyon, don't," yet all the while press harder and harder against him. Semyon had to admit that her shivering and whispers had excited him, sending the blood rushing to his head. Only when Vera sensed that they would both soon reach the point of no return would she force herself to break away from him. In time, when he kissed her eyes or stroked her hair, he would not experience that feeling of bliss. Later still, whenever she pressed against him, as was her wont, when her bosom began to raise and fall excitedly, he would be irritated and, in the end, become disgusted.

No longer did he stumble about in a daze all day, nor did he dream of her at night. Something inside him was

crumbling to dust, and as the dust settled it pricked his heart. True, he would sometimes feel a vague desire to see her, embrace her and feel her hot body beneath his hands. But this was plain, unadulterated lust, and he knew it.

Still and all, he could not understand Vera. He knew that although she let him unbutton her blouse, she would probably bite him savagely and break free, leaving him with nothing save the shreds of her clothing, before she'd let him go all the way. That meant she was a decent girl. Then again, her sort of decency seemed strange and somehow sordid and unnatural to him. Even that memorable June day, when he and Vera had been lying on the grass on the island and he had wondered whether they indeed could not live without each other, an inner voice was telling him he could make out very well without her, indeed, and most probably would, because Vera was like a glass of tepid water: you could drink it, but it wouldn't quench your thirst.

As he now sat on the ground by the fence in the darkness he recalled the strange way he had compared Vera with a glass of tepid water. He smiled and cursed himself for being such a stupid fool and when, actually, he couldn't have cared less about her and Aleinikov. It was all over between him and Vera. However, there was something he couldn't understand. If she and Aleinikov were really serious, why was she offended by the fact that she wasn't going out with him any more? Why did she want to go out with him? Maybe it was because she still wasn't sure of Aleinikov and didn't want to lose him as long as she wasn't?

This thought interested him. Vera had once said that the person who took what he wanted from life and hung on to it was one who'd have a good life. She seemed to be just such a person. This was what he had never liked about her. This and similar ideas of hers were what had in the end destroyed the happy glow in his heart and his hopes and dreams of his first love. And if this was so, if Vera, fearful lest a big fish get away, was still keeping the small fry she had already caught, just in case, what a slippery, disgusting person she was. And he, stupid fool, hadn't been able to get to the bottom of things in all this time. He'd

have to find out just how slippery she was. But how was he to do it? Should he tail her when she was with Aleinikov? But he didn't want to be a spy. How he could find out for sure? Should he ask Kolya? Although, he could imagine what Kolya would tell him! Besides, you could never really find out what was going on by questioning a third person.

A figure appeared at the end of the dark street. "It's Aleinikov!" the thought flashed through his mind, and he pressed closer against the fence. A moment later he realized he was mistaken. Whoever it was was whistling blithely, and Aleinikov was much too glum a person to whistle like that.

Semyon hoped he would not be noticed, and if he were, that whoever it was would hurry by. It was a dark, still night and things had been rather uneasy in the village ever since the refugees had arrived.

When the man drew abreast of Semyon he stopped whistling and said, "Hey, you! What're you doing here? I'll bet you've had too much to drink. Come on, get up!"

Semyon recognized the voice. It was his cousin Yura Savelyev. "He's a bold fellow," he decided. Sensing that it was stupid not to answer, he got up.

Semyon had first met Yura about two weeks after the latter had arrived in Shantara. Semyon had been unloading lumber in the factory yard when he spotted a hook-nosed fellow with hair as blond as his own standing beside his tractor.

"Go on, scram, before you get killed by rolling logs!" Semyon had shouted.

"Are you Semyon Savelyev?" the youth had said, coming closer and fixing his green eyes on Semyon.

"What if I am? I said scram."

"My name's Yura Savelyev. You're my cousin. My dad's the director of this plant. Glad to meet you."

They had shaken hands and sized each other up. Yura had been in a hurry, because he had not wanted to be late for work. He had said he was glad to have met Semyon and that they'd have to get together and have a long talk some day, but they had not as yet. They had met several times after that in the factory yard, but Yura always seemed to be late and raced by, waving to Semyon on the run. "He's

always flustered," Semyon said to himself and then concluded, "People like him live long lives, because they're always late when it's time to die."

Semyon got up from the ground and took a step towards Yura, who seemed ready to fight, if necessary.

"It's me. Semyon."

"Hey! What're you doing here? "

"I was just resting."

"I was wondering who was wearing out Comrade Kruzhilin's fence. At first I thought it was a calf, or a dog, but when I got closer I saw it was a man."

"You're not timid, are you? "

Yura's trousers were tucked into the tops of his boots, and his light jacket was unbuttoned. He smelled of cologne. It seemed strange that for once Yura was not in a hurry and was just standing there, talking calmly.

"Where are you going? " Semyon asked.

"Hm. There's a girl I know. She's really something. Especially when she lets her hair down. Wow! " He shook his head at the memory. "You can drown in her hair. You know, you can just suffocate to death." He stepped into the beam of light that fell from the window and glanced at his watch. "I didn't know it was this late! And my mermaid doesn't like me to be late. Hey! Want to come along? She has a girlfriend."

"No, thanks. I'm waiting for somebody here."

"Ah. I see. That's what I thought. Well, I'd better hurry. We should really get together some day. Why don't you come over? We'll all be glad to see you, my folks and me. After all, it's about time we got to know each other."

He was off, and shouted this last sentence over his shoulder. After Yura had been swallowed up by the darkness Semyon said to himself, "He seems to have a very easy life." However, he did not say it reproachfully or irritably, but indifferently.

He went back to the fence sat down on the ground again, wondering whether he should wait for Vera or go home. While he was deciding what to do the light in the upstairs window went out, making everything seem darker still outside. "Well, well, well. I wonder whether she'll be

alone when she comes out or whether somebody's going to walk her home? "

The outside door squeaked. Someone came out and stood on the porch, directly across the street from him.

"Yakov Nikolayevich? " Vera called softly.

"Aha! There! What'd I say? " Semyon gloated.

Someone walked by quickly, nearly at a run. At the very same moment Vera's heels clicked down the steps of the high wooden porch.

"I thought you'd be waiting for me," she said and sounded annoyed. "I phoned you half an hour ago."

"I'm sorry, Vera," Aleinikov replied. "I had a rush job to attend to when you phoned. But I've managed to finish it. And here I am. See, I've been running, just like a kid."

"I didn't know what to do, go home or sleep over in my office. Let's go. I've had such a hard day."

And they walked off, conversing in low voices.

Semyon looked after them thoughtfully. He felt strangely light-hearted and free, as light-hearted as he had the evening Vera and he had agreed to put their wedding off till after the war.

* * *

Semyon felt neither hatred nor contempt for Vera. Anything he might have felt before was gone, vanished, carried away by the wind, as it carries away the last wisps of smoke from a dead campfire. His spirits rose, and he often hummed to himself in the cab of his tractor. He sometimes met Vera going to or returning from work. He sometimes glimpsed her kerchief over the fence that separated their yards. Whenever he did he would wave and call out cheerfully. "Hi, there! " and then continue on his way or else go back inside.

In the beginning, Vera smiled in reply and also waved, but then she apparently noticed the change in Semyon and became alerted. Her almond eyes regarded him anxiously. "Semyon! Wait a minute," she had said on several occasions, turning to stop him, but he had hurried by, saying,

"I'm in a rush, Vera."

The day Andrei had run away from home Vera had joined in the search for him at the railroad station. Her appearance there had angered Semyon.

"What're you doing here? "

"Nothing. I just want to help look for him."

"A fat chance we have of finding him now."

After searching everywhere in vain they had sat down to rest on a time-darkened wooden bench in the near-empty waiting room.

"That's some kid. He thinks he's so smart. Don't worry, the militia'll find him," Anikei Yelizarov, the militiaman, said as he passed them and went out to the platform.

Vera and Semyon sat side by side in silence. He was very depressed.

"Semyon," Vera said hesitantly. "I know you're angry on account of Aleinikov, but it's not my fault."

"How can you talk about that now? " he snapped.

"How can I find any other time to if you keep running away from me? "

"Oh, shut up! " He got up, but Vera gripped him and would not let go. "Let go! People are looking at us."

"So what? I don't care. I've got to tell you. You've got to listen! "

"All right." He seemed to be seething. "Go on and tell me. You've been dying to anyway."

They sat down again. Vera kept worrying her kerchief.

"Anyway, Aleinikov came to ask me to marry him. But it's not my fault, is it? He's had his eye on me for a long time. You know how it all started? He'd bump into me at the office and his eyes would burn right into me. Then he started coming into my office. He'd come in and stand by the window, and never say a word. He made me so nervous. I didn't know why he kept coming. And then he came over to the house. I nearly died when I saw him." She spoke rapidly, swallowing the ends of her words and avoiding Semyon's eyes. Her cheeks were aflame.

"And then what? " He stared at her scarlet ears.

"That's just it. Then what? Should I tell him to his face that he's crazy? That he's practically an old man? Is that what you want me to say? "

"Why not? "

"I'm scared to." She sighed. "Honest to God, I am. You know who he is. I remember the time he took your Uncle Ivan away, and then Manya Ogorodnikova's father. I haven't forgotten any of that. And when ... when he sees me home after work, I'm scared to death when he walks near me."

"Ah! So you do see him? "

"Yes. He walks me home sometimes, if I have to stay late at the office. He seems to know when I'm working late. And he waits for me outside. He's embarrassed about coming upstairs to call for me."

"So he waits outside? And what do you talk about when he walks you home? "

"Nothing. He doesn't say anything and neither do I. We don't say a word."

"Does he know about us? "

"Yes. I told him I had a boyfriend and that we're going to get married."

"What'd he say? "

"Nothing."

"You've got a funny kind of an admirer, don't you? "

"I know. I told you you'd have a big laugh when I told you about it. And it's been dragging on like this. I feel like I'm caught in a net."

"And how do you think you'll get out of it? "

"Nohow. He'll leave me alone soon. Every time we meet he seems more fidgety. I'm no wife for him. Don't you think he knows that? And you were ready to jilt me. How could you ever think I'd prefer an old man to you? "

"Maybe," he mused. "Look at me."

Vera raised her head. The color drained out of her face. The eyes she raised at Semyon were clear and slightly surprised.

"So he always sort of guesses whenever you have to work late? Maybe you stay on after office hours on purpose? "

"Don't be stupid! "

"Maybe you even phone him and tell him to call for you? "

"How can you say that? " she said and pouted.

He wanted to shout, to tell her it was all a lie, because he'd overheard them one night, but then, looking at her surprised eyes and pouting mouth he decided it wasn't worth it. It would only trigger a new, long explanation on her part. He surprised himself by the firmness in his voice as he concluded simply,

"I don't love you, Vera."

"What? "

"You heard me. And I never did."

"What're you saying? "

"I thought I loved you, but I didn't. And you don't love me." He stood up.

She slid over to the far end of the bench as if half-expecting him to hit her. Her hands and the kerchief she was clutching flew to her breast.

"And you never loved anyone, Vera. You don't love me, and you won't love Aleinikov, or anybody else. Because you've nothing to love with."

"What do you mean? Why not? "

"I don't know. That's something I just don't know."

He went out, leaving her there on the shiny waiting-room bench. She was still pressing her hands to her breast. Her sloe eyes seemed at a loss to understand what had happened.

* * *

When Yakov Aleinikov showed up in the Iniutin house so unexpectedly he scared Vera's parents to death.

"This is it! He's probably come to settle the score for my father," Kirian Iniutin said to himself and felt his body turn cold.

Peg-Leg Demyan Iniutin, who had been a member of Mikhail Kaftanov's gang of bandits, had been killed one night by a blow to the head. When Kirian had heard the captured members of the gang discussing this he had been torn between pity and relief, although aloud he had said for all to hear, "Good riddance." However, ever since Ivan Savelyev had been arrested, he had feared that he, too, might be brought to account for his father's evil deeds. In

the years that followed there always lurked in his mind the possibility of Yakov Aleinikov coming for him one day.

Fyodor Savelyev knew of this and often spoke irritably, though with a touch of compassion and condescendingly, "Stop shaking like a leaf, Kirian. Nobody's bothering me on account of Ivan. It's not our fault if my brother and your father had horseshit in their heads instead of brains. Don't you think Aleinikov knows it? If your father was alive today he'd have been arrested just like Ivan."

Kirian would agree but, still, he awaited Yakov's arrival. And now he had come.

"Hello. I haven't come for any special reason. I mean, there is a reason. I wanted to talk to you about Vera," Aleinikov said, sitting down awkwardly on one of the stools.

Neither Vera nor her parents could at first understand what he was talking about. His words somehow didn't make sense. Finally, Vera cried out in a strangled voice, buried her face in her hands, dashed out of the kitchen and into the adjoining room. She slammed the door behind her and leaned against it. Her head was aflame, and shivers ran down her body. Her heart pounded so that each heartbeat thudded inside her head.

When she sensed that Aleinikov was gone (she hadn't heard him go, but truly sensed it) she opened the door. Her father was rubbing his damp forehead, while her mother sat dazedly on the same stool Aleinikov had just vacated. Anfisa's cheeks had a bright, unhealthy flush, though her eyes were sad and dull. Vera rushed into her arms and burst into tears.

"That's some how-do-you-do," Kirian drawled, and it was difficult to say whether he was expressing surprise at the unexpected suitor or at seeing his wife and daughter embracing each other.

That night Anfisa shared Vera's bed. Vera moved over silently to make room for her. They were awake most of the night, lying side by side, staring into the darkness, and sighing in turn.

"What'll you do now, dear?" Anfisa finally asked.

"I don't know." Vera's voice was unexpectedly calm.

Anfisa started, as if she had been doused with cold

water. Vera continued speaking unhurriedly in the same even voice, as if she were discussing the style of a new dress she was going to make herself.

"He's an old man and ... and anyway, I'm scared of him. Whenever he comes into the office it gives me the creeps. You should see the way he always looks at me. I know why now. But I've got Semyon. We're going to get married."

"But do you love him? Do you love Semyon?" Anfisa whispered angrily.

"Sure, I do. It's all been decided."

"Then what're you talking about now? And what're you sighing about?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's what I want to know: what do you mean?"

Vera moved as if she was uncomfortable. She rose up on an elbow. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Anfisa swallowed a mouthfull of air and said no more for a quite a while.

The late-rising moon appeared. Its pale light streamed in through the window, touching the nickel-plated balls at the head of the iron bedstead, making them gleam dully.

"There's all kinds of love, Vera," Anfisa said unexpectedly.

Now Vera was the one to be surprised at the sound of her mother's voice. It was sad and rueful. She imagined that her mother's eyes were probably just as sad as they had been after Aleinikov had left.

"When the sun shines through the window these balls are so bright it hurts your eyes to look at them. But now you can barely see them. They look dead by moonlight."

"What do you mean?"

"I was wondering what sort of love you have for Semyon. Is it true love or...."

"Stop it! I'm not asking you what sort of love you have for Pa."

Anfisa gulped nervously again and her chest heaved.

"Or who's pa you love, mine or Semyon's," Vera added viciously.

"You're a fool!" Anfisa turned sharply, reached out

for her daughter's face and clamped her dry, hot palm over Vera's mouth.

"You think I don't know what's going on!" she brushed her mother's hand away. "I'm not a baby anymore."

The bed trembled, and Vera realized her mother was weeping silently. Her irritation passed, and she felt sorry for her.

"Don't cry, Ma. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

Anfisa stopped sobbing. Once again they lay there silently.

"I know you're not a baby, Vera, and you know what's going on," Anfisa said wearily. "But what do you know about my love? Nothing. And nobody knows. The gossips always called me a tramp, but I'm not. It's not my fault if I can't get him out of my heart, though God knows how guilty I feel about it. I just can't." She sobbed again.

They seemed to have changed places, with Anfisa becoming Vera's daughter and Vera becoming Anfisa's mother. Vera tried to calm her. She stroked her hair and warm, soft shoulders.

"He's such a leech. He knows how I feel about him," Anfisa continued. "That's why the three of us are like homeless souls: Anna, Kirian and me. I don't know why we go on living and torturing ourselves like this. Anna's a good woman. And your father's a good man. You don't even know how good he is, Vera. Fyodor doesn't come anywhere near him."

"You're right, Ma, I don't. I never noticed it. I always thought Pa was a stupid drunk."

"Living with me would do more to him than make him stupid and a drunk. I'm surprised he hasn't gone crazy yet. That's because he loves me so."

"What?" Vera giggled. "He does not!"

"Yes, he does. I know. That's why he lets me get away with it. There's one thing I promised him for letting me live the way I want to. I told him that any child I'd have would be his, but that he should leave me be. And I said if he ever laid a finger on Fyodor I'd leave him. That's why he never did. In the beginning he looked the other way and gritted his teeth, but he never said anything. Then he start-

ed beating me. He'd get drunk and nearly kill me. But I never put up a fight, because I knew how hard it was for him."

As Vera listened to her mother she became more and more amazed at the great complexity of human relationships now being revealed to her.

"But how'd it happen?" she whispered. "When did you begin to love him like that? And why? What for?"

"Hm. That's something you can't explain. Everything's all mixed up and tangled into such a knot that nobody'll ever be able to untangle it. And there's no sense untangling it now. Everything would've been fine if Fyodor married me instead of Anna. And then I married Pa on the rebound."

"But did you love Pa when you married him?" Then, sensing that her mother's silence meant she was considering the question, she added, "I mean, just a little bit?"

"Maybe I did love him a little bit. But I didn't know how much I loved Fyodor. Or maybe I thought it would pass, that the fire would go out and everything would turn to ashes. But it only began to burn brighter. Do you think I'd have married Pa otherwise? Or anybody else?"

They were speaking in undertones, staring at the metal balls that gleamed in the gloom and then suddenly disappeared one after the other when the moon passed on and its pale beams no longer reached the window.

"I never talked to you like this before, but something made me now when you were lying here and sighing."

"So what? It really is a laugh. Just think, an old geezer like him falling in love with me."

"Don't lie to me, Vera! You're talking about Aleinikov. And there's nobody in the whole district people are more afraid of than him. And I can tell the temptation made your conscience wriggle."

"It did not! Don't you go making things up!"

"I'm not," Anfisa said and sighed. "But it seems to be getting all wriggly somehow."

"That's interesting, isn't it? I don't know whether it's straight or wriggly, but you do."

"Somebody standing off to a side can always see things better. Anyway, see you don't make a big mistake. You

might give in to temptation and then kick yourself for it if Semyon's your true love."

"Do you really think there's such a thing as true love?"

Anfisa seemed to have stopped breathing altogether. Her daughter continued sarcastically.

"And what's true love? You run after Semyon's father and think that's true love, but it's not. It's all very simple. You like him because he's strong and lucky, and he's getting ahead. And the reason you run after him is because you're sorry you married a nobody. You do it just to get even with Pa for being a nobody."

"Vera! " Anfisa sat up.

"What? " Vera, too, sat up. "You'll wake everybody up."

Anfisa sat there for a few moments and then slipped down again, pulling the covers up to her chin. "So that's what you've grown up to be? I never even guessed."

"You know it now."

Anfisa lay by her daughter's side for another ten or fifteen minutes, then threw back the covers and swung her feet over the side of the bed. "What about you, and what about Semyon?"

"What about him? He'll survive if I decide to.... But I said I don't know yet. I'll see."

Anfisa sobbed again.

"There you go again. What're you so worried about? You don't have to decide anything."

"How can you? How can you?" Anfisa was choked by sobs. She could not continue, but Vera understood what she had wanted to say.

"Very easily, because Semyon.... I thought he was like his pa. If he's like anybody's pa, he's like mine, not his. When I discovered that, I decided we'd better put off the wedding. Especially since there's a war on. Anyway, we agreed to put it off. But I don't want to break off with him completely. I didn't want to up till now, and I don't want to now, either. I want to have a good look at Aleinikov first and see what he's really like."

Anfisa waited until Vera had had her say. Then she rose and went back to her own bed in the kitchen, stop-

ping at the doorway to say in a voice that was not her own, "You do that. You have a good look. But I won't let you ruin Semyon's life. I'll tell him what a sneaky little heart you have. So's he'll know."

"Don't you dare! Hear me?" Vera jumped out of bed, ran barefoot across the room and dug her fingers into her mother's shoulders. "You mind your own business, understand? Or else...."

"Or else what?"

"I don't know. But you'll be sorry. I'll hate you for the rest of your life. You don't know me, Ma."

"That's right. I've never known what you were like."

* * *

The day after Aleinikov had come calling Vera stayed in her tiny office all day. She was positive that the entire staff now knew of his strange proposal and that all eyes were on her. If anybody brought in something to type she would take the pages in silence, never once raising her eyes, and her hands trembled as she did.

She was positive that Aleinikov would drop in to see her. Every time the door opened she would blush so hard her neck became red, and she didn't know what she would do if he actually did enter.

However, Aleinikov did not show up at the District Committee that day, or the following, or the one after. Vera had calmed down a bit and was beginning to pout.

Towards evening of the fifth or sixth day he finally appeared. Vera was sitting with her back to the door, and when it squeaked open she did not even turn.

"Excuse me. It's me," he said.

She bolted out of her chair. Her hands flew to her breast. Then she turned back, sat down and bent over her old typewriter again. Her cheeks were scarlet, as were her small ears. The back of her neck that was covered with springy curls was beginning to turn red as well.

"Yes? Is there anything I can do for you, Yakov Nikolayevich?"

"Um, I wanted to... I'd like to talk to you now," he said awkwardly. .

Vera was still pressing her hands to her chest. Her heart was beating more calmly. She smiled, became instantly afraid of her smile, and bit her lip. "Yes? "

"Not here, though. Someone might come in."

"Where else? "

"I don't know. Go someplace. Wherever you want to. And I'll follow you. Please. It's very important."

Vera stood up. She flashed her puzzled, amazed eyes at him and then yanked her thin coat off the rack.

They walked down the street towards the outskirts of the village, with Vera leading the way, staring at the ground. It was a warm, quiet evening. The sky was gray and calm. There was not a cloud in sight. Far to the west several silvery-pink strips were still lit by the sun that had already dipped beyond the horizon.

They passed the last houses and entered the steppe. Vera walked along between the small hills that were bald after the summer and emerged at the Gromotushka Bushes. She stopped by the thicket, sat down on a hummock and pulled the skirt of her coat down to her ankles.

"God, how ashamed I am! " she whispered when Aleinikov came up to her. She buried her face in her hands. "I felt people staring at me out of every window."

"You're right. It wasn't a very good idea, but I couldn't think of a better way to ask you out."

"What am I doing? Why'd I come here? I'm such a fool." Vera looked up at him helplessly, as she had back in the office.

"Don't say that. I can say I don't know how I got here, either." There was the same note of bitter regret in his voice. He sat down on the ground beside her and became lost in thought. Vera was looking at him out of the corner of her eye, biting her lip and wondering how she was to behave and what she was to say in reply. She had a fairly good idea of what he was going to say.

"You sure scared us, especially Ma and Pa, when you came to the house."

He raised his eyes and looked at her long and hard.

"What're you looking at me for like that? "

"You're right. I regret to say that people are afraid of me."

"You mean you don't like it? " There was a trace of a smile on her face.

Aleinikov looked at her in wonder, but it only lasted a moment. His face immediately became solemn and aloof. "I know how silly I probably look, Vera," he said, barely moving his thin lips. "How very silly. You're young enough to be my daughter. You're twenty, and I'm fifty. I know nobody will understand me, just like your parents don't. Your father never said a word. Your mother said she couldn't and didn't want to speak for you, and that I'd have to ask you myself. That's what I'm doing now. I'm asking you."

His voice trembled, and he seemed as bashful as a boy, not knowing what to do with his hands and avoiding her eyes. Vera was very still. One elbow leaned on her knee, and her hand covered her face. Underneath it she was smiling faintly. No longer was she afraid of Aleinikov. Her heart was at ease now. She was figuring that although fifty was a lot, he wasn't too bad, actually. He would have been better looking if he didn't have that awful scar on his face, but still, it wasn't too bad. It even made him look original. She wondered how long he would live. If he lived another ten years, she'd be thirty. That wasn't too bad. She'd still be able to get married again. But if he lived another twenty, it would make her forty, and forty was a critical age for a woman.

As Vera was thinking this she did not hide the fact from herself that it was disgusting of her to be thinking such thoughts, and this both confused and annoyed her. "Oh, well," she said to herself, shrugging them off and frowning. But she could not understand whether she was shrugging off her thoughts or annoyance.

"So I finally decided to ask you," he continued, looking off into the distance. "Although I'm sure you'll probably say no. Still, I've got to ask you, to put an end to the stupid position I'm in."

As the sunlight went out in the last strips of cloud, the sky became lower, and the air became heavy with the chill

gloom of evening. The Gromotushka Bushes had been very still when Vera and Aleinikov had first come there, and although there was still no wind, the treetops had begun to sway lazily, rustling their dry leaves dolefully. Aleinikov listened to the faint sound.

"I can't give you a definite answer yet."

"All right. I understand. I'd like to ask you for a favor. Will you come here in a week from now, at the same time? Don't misunderstand me. I don't mean I'll expect your answer then. I just want us to have some time together. I'm not going to rush you. You tell me yourself whenever you feel like it."

It was very still and deserted here in the steppe at the edge of the Gromotushka Bushes. The trees alone rustled mournfully, as if complaining about the darkness, their loneliness, the fact that summer had ended, their leaves had withered and would soon fall, and that the long, harsh winter with its long, dark nights and howling blizzards would soon be upon them.

Vera was suddenly overcome by a strange desire to see Manya Ogorodnikova. She just wanted to talk to her, but not about Semyon, and certainly not about Aleinikov. She hadn't seen Manya since summer and wondered how she was getting along. Maybe they would talk about the time the two of them had been up on the stove ledge and frightened to death as they watched Aleinikov pacing up and down in his long greatcoat when he had come to arrest Manya's father. Life was indeed full of surprises! Her heart had practically stopped from fear as she had stared at Aleinikov then, but now the same man was trying to tell her he loved her and was as awkward as a newborn calf.

They returned to the village a few minutes later, said good night and went their separate ways. Vera ran down several small lanes until she reached a weatherbeaten little cottage that crouched in the darkness. The shutters were closed, but a faint light cast by a kerosene lamp came through the large cracks. That meant Manya was at home. Indeed, where else could she be at this time of the night?

Vera went into the yard and knocked at the latched shutter. "It's me, Manya. Vera. I've come to see you. Open the door."

Peering through a wide crack, she saw a shadow fall upon the muslin curtain. Someone had come up to the window.

"Hey, Manya! Can't you hear me? "

There was not a sound, although the shadow moved.

"Who's there? "

"I said it's me, Vera. Don't you recognize me? "

"All right. Wait a minute." The shadow disappeared.

Vera waited for quite some time on the flagstone that served as a front porch. At last she heard steps and a bolt being thrown back.

"You scared me," Manya said, yawning and wrapping her coat around her. "What're you doing out this late? " Although she was dishevelled, and a loose strand of hair had got out from under her shawl, her voice did not seem sleepy. In fact, she sounded annoyed.

"I was out for a walk, and I decided to drop in and see you. Maybe I'll stay over. I haven't seen you in ages."

"That's right," Manya agreed and yawned again. "You can't stay over here, though."

"Why not? "

"I've already got someone here for the night."

"Who? " Vera was so surprised she took a step back. "You mean it? Did you get married? "

"I said I've got somebody for the night. One today and maybe somebody else tomorrow."

"You're fooling."

"No, I'm not." She smiled, but it was a mean smile. "You're the one to get married. I manage like this. It's all I can count on. When are you and Semyon getting married? "

"I don't know. It won't be soon, though. We can't get married while there's a war on, so we've decided to put it off till after."

"Ah," Manya said indifferently. "All right. But there's no sense in me waiting till the war's over." She was silent for a few moments and then said, "You'll have to pardon me. Come around again. But come in the daytime." And she shut the door in Vera's face.

"That's a fine how-do-you-do! " Vera was thinking as she hurried home. "She used to blush every time a boy

looked at her, and now.... When'd she manage to start in like this? "

As she lay in her bed she wondered what she was going to tell Aleinikov on their next date. Should she say "yes"? No, that would never do. She didn't want him to think she was in a rush. She'd play hard to get. But she couldn't lead him on too long, because although old men were quick about falling in love, they cooled off just as fast.

Having come to this conclusion, she fell asleep.

* * *

A week later she was at the Gromotushka Bushes, nearly at the same spot she had been before, watching the sky turn dark. She decided she'd hesitate at first and shed a few tears, and then pretend she was beginning to fall in love with him, and consent.

Aleinikov appeared from the darkness. Vera cried out and hid in the bushes.

"Vera! "

She made her way through the underbrush until she had nearly reached the bank and then stopped.

"I didn't think you'd come," Aleinikov said, coming up behind her.

"I didn't think I'd come, either. Not until this evening," she spoke in a near-whisper. "And I don't know why I did."

Vera emerged from the thicket and walked along the edge of the Gromotushka Bushes into the steppe, staring at the ground all the while. Aleinikov walked by her side. After a while she turned and walked back, and he did, too.

They continued walking back and forth thus in silence until Vera became tired.

"I can't understand what's happening," she said, stopping. "Why am I here? And what's happening to me? "

"I told you I didn't want to rush you, Vera. If you feel you can't love me, I'll understand. I won't be angry at you. I have no right to. It'll be a blow, but I know girls don't marry unless they love a man. What sort of a life would they have otherwise? "

As Vera listened to his halting words her heart thudded dully, and an unpleasant chill seeped into her chest. She was alerted and worried, but not because he expected her to love him. She had a feeling that some small change had come over him during the week that had gone by, and especially since that first evening when he had come to her house. It was as wispy as a cobweb, a faint little doubt about whether he really wanted to get mixed up in all this. Vera didn't know the reason for this nor how she was now to behave in order to dispell his doubt, if that was what it really was. "Oh, no, my dear Aleinikov, if you think you'll wriggle off the hook that easily, you have another thought coming," she said to herself. Then she swayed, as if she was going to fall. As he caught her by the elbow she dropped her head on his shoulder and began to sob.

"Don't. Please don't," he said helplessly, with his hands on her shoulders. She continued to sob. Her lips brushed against his cheek as if by accident. ("Well! He's just shaved.") Then she began kissing him passionately. She began slipping down, as if her knees were buckling. He called her name over and over, and gripped her shoulders to keep her from falling. Then, as if mastering what little strength she had left, she tensed, threw back her head, pressed her fists against his chest and broke away, running back to the village.

"Vera! " he called out one last time.

She did not turn back.

Vera did not sleep that night. She kept staring into the darkness at the dull gleam of the nickel-plated balls atop the iron bedstead, and trying to imagine what Aleinikov was doing and what he was thinking of her.

The next morning she did not have any breakfast, nor did she have any supper that night. The second night she made herself stay awake. She did not even lie down, but sat on the edge of her bed, opening the window every so often to breathe in the cool night air and thus keep from falling asleep. Towards morning she could barely keep her eyes open. Not wanting to waken her mother or Kolya, she climbed out of her window, crossed the village to the Gromotukha, splashed some icy water on her face and then sat on an overturned rowboat, watching the distant

sun consume the darkness over Zvenigora and the hills and plains beyond the river taking shape as the morning fog in the upper reaches of the river began to turn pink.

She refused to have breakfast that morning as well.

"What's the matter with you?" Anfisa said anxiously. "Look at you! You look terrible."

"I'm all right," Vera snapped and went to her room.

She looked at herself in the mirror and smiled, for she indeed looked terrible. The past two days and nights had sharpened her features as after a long illness, and there were deep rings under her eyes. She was very pleased and consented to having a glass of tea and a slice of bread. Then she put on a tight-fitting dress and, paying no attention to her anxious mother, went off to work.

Vera all but fell asleep over her typewriter. When Kruzhilin called her into his office after lunch and gave her some typing to do, he looked at her closely and said,

"You're not sick, are you?"

"No. I don't think so."

"There's no rush about this. Go home if you don't feel well."

She struggled through half of the report, then snatched up the receiver and called Aleinikov.

On Kruzhilin's orders Vera often phoned the various district offices, summoning the chiefs to meetings, so that the telephone operators knew her voice and always put her through immediately. That was why she had no sooner said she wished to be connected with Aleinikov than she heard his voice saying.

"Hello. Yes?"

"It's me," Vera said in a faint voice.

This was apparently so unexpected that it took Aleinikov some time to reply. "Yes? What is it?"

Now it was Vera's turn to be silent. Then she sighed.

"Is anything wrong?" he said cautiously, fearful lest the operator was listening in.

"I don't know. Maybe. Can you come today? You know where?"

"Right now? Why?"

"I don't know. But right now."

"All right."

Vera was not too sure that he would show up, but he did. He came awkwardly along the steppe, past the black hillocks scorched by the summer's sun, and kept turning back as if he was afraid someone was following him. It was a warm, sunny day. Aleinikov had on a gray suit and a white tieless shirt. From afar he looked like a young man of twenty-five.

Vera was waiting for him beneath a birch tree whose yellow leaves trickled down with a dry, rustling sound. Seeing that Aleinikov had spotted her, she darted into the thicket and ran through it to the river bank. There she sat down at the edge of a bluff covered with dry leaves and tucked her feet under her.

At the sound of his approaching steps she lowered her head, as if trying to hide her face, and only when his steps stopped and she sensed that he was standing beside her, not knowing what to say, did she slowly turn. The astonishment on his face and the way his thin lips twitched proved that she had not fasted and stayed awake for forty-eight hours in vain.

"Vera?" he said in a worried voice and made as if to come closer.

"No, don't!" she lurched. "Don't come any closer. Sit down over there."

Aleinikov did as he was told. She stretched out on her back, crossed her arms under her head and stared up at the pale, colorless sky in which there was nothing save the faded emptiness left by the summer.

"Did anything happen?"

"No. What could've happened?" she replied, thinking happily that tonight, at last, she would have a good night's sleep.

The Gromotushka, that lively stream, was babbling softly at the foot of the bluff, lapping at the clayey bank. Vera listened to the faint sound and thought that Aleinikov probably had his eyes on her, that he was taking in her firm breasts that bulged beneath her tight dress, her well-shaped legs, her young, lithe body, so helpless and yet so unattainable as yet. She cocked an eye at him to make sure and discovered he was not looking at her at all. He was sitting on a pile of dry leaves, looking over the bluff

and listening to the gurgling water thoughtfully. She was disappointed, but not too much so.

"There were people in my office when you phoned. It wasn't the best of times."

"Were you ever up in a plane?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't. But looking up at the sky like this makes me think I'm flying over the fields and the woods, and the mountains. It makes me dizzy."

She fell silent and decided she would not say anything until he spoke first. She was positive that he was wondering what had come over her, why she had become so thin and had dark circles under her eyes, and why she had decided to ask him to come here in the middle of the day. Perhaps he was wondering whether she might really be falling in love with him. That was all for the good. She wanted him to be sure that she was. However, she did not know what she was to do now to bring the meeting to an end. She was dying to sleep. She could barely keep her eyes open. Why didn't he say anything?

The minutes dragged on.

When he spoke at last his voice sounded uncertain. "I'll have to ask you not to phone me at the office. We'll have to make some other sort of arrangement for meeting. And not in the daytime. After all, it puts me in a very awkward position. And then, there are the telephone operators. I don't want any gossip ahead of time."

Vera knew exactly what he meant but pretended not to. She acted as though she were in a daze and murmured, still staring up at the vacant sky, "What do I care about the telephone operators and their gossip?"

She got up and walked slowly away across the steppe, leaving Aleinikov on the bank to decide at last why she had become so thin in just two days' time, why she had summoned here in the middle of the day, and what she had meant when she had said she didn't care.

* * *

They had many dates after that, sometimes every other day, but never less than one every two or three days. Each

time they parted they would decide on the time and place for their next date. Vera believed she was playing her part well. She seemed a different person at each successive date: now wild and carefree, now melancholy, now passionate, at which time she would kiss him hungrily, or now aloof and untouchable.

Sometimes Vera would not keep to their agreement and would phone him ahead of time to say, "Today, not tomorrow. At the same place. I can't wait." She would speak quickly and hang up before he had a chance to reply.

Sometimes she would come right out and demand that he see her home after work, saying she would be very late at the office and was afraid to go home in the dark.

On two or three occasions after that Aleinikov had again asked her not to phone him at the office, but she had merely laughed and, taking his hands, had whirled him around, chanting a children's song: "Scaredy little rabbit...."

In the end, he gave in.

As Vera lay in bed after each of their dates she would carefully go over everything he had said and done, and how he had looked at her. At first, all seemed to be going well. He would be in good spirits when he came to their rendezvous, and if Vera would begin kissing him, he would at first respond as shyly as a boy and as awkwardly, but then would become passionate and, sensing that his blood was racing hotly through his veins, she would break out of his embrace, run off a few steps and saucily ask him to please cool off. If she were sad and thoughtful he would question her with concern, demanding to know whether there was any unpleasantness at home or at the office and try to cheer her up.

One day she said, "Why do you need me? Why do you love me? What for?"

"I really don't know. You're beautiful," he replied and then paused. When he continued what he said seemed strange and difficult to understand, "But I don't think it's a matter of being beautiful or not. You're young, and I feel young again when I'm with you. It's as if there never were those many years and many things that ... which...."

What I mean is, I feel as young and carefree as I did long ago. And I feel that life ahead is pure and simple, and not at all like the years I've left behind. A very, very different kind of life."

"Not like this. Like something else. I don't understand you."

"I'm afraid I can't explain it any better than I have."

"Didn't you have an interesting life? I know you were a partisan in Kruzhilin's detachment. And then you tracked down enemies of the State. And now...."

"Don't ever talk about that! Hear me? Never." He spoke quickly, and his words were nearly a shout.

Both his tone of voice and what he had said frightened her.

In time, however, a change came over him. He still seemed happy and cheerful when he was with her, but more and more often he would suddenly and unaccountably become thoughtful and reserved, and Vera would catch him looking at her closely, as if he were dissecting her. No longer did he suddenly become excited and passionate when she kissed him. He now seemed to return her caresses unwillingly, and his lips were slack and cold.

"What's the matter? " Vera was now the one to ask in a worried voice.

"Nothing, really. I've had a very hard day," he would say and force a smile.

Vera was quite aware of it being a forced smile. "I've missed my chance! I've dragged it out for too long! " she scolded herself. "But never mind, I'll still have you where I want you."

Not a trace remained of her former aloofness or pensiveness. She would come running excitedly to every rendezvous and would throw herself into his arms, kissing his lips, scar and shaggy brows, and then only would she look up at him for several long moments. She would bury her head in his chest and speak in a muffled voice. "At last. I thought the day would never come."

"I'm happy to see you, too, Vera."

He would speak calmly and evenly, and as Vera pressed against him her sharp teeth would bite her lip in dismay.

One day, after he had greeted her thus, she burst into tears in his arms.

"Now, now, Vera, that's no way to act," he said, stroking her shoulder.

"Are you glad to see me, too?" she cried, raising her tear-stained face. "You're not! You're not! And what're you patting me like that for? Like a father, or a grandfather? Don't make a face! That's what I said: like an old man! Silly me. Look! Listen." She grabbed his hand and pressed it to her chest. There, beneath her firm, virgin breast, her heart was racing.

"Yes. I know, Vera," he murmured and moved his fingers, in an attempt to remove his hand. She understood the gesture, thrust his hand away and began to sob louder.

"What do you know? You don't know anything!" Then, refuting what she'd just said, she shouted, "You know that you've made me love you! You know I've fallen in love with you like a silly fool. You know the answer is 'yes'. You know it, but you don't say anything. You haven't even asked me what the answer is. Are you waiting for me to tell you? Well, I'm telling you now."

They had met on the bank of the Gromotukha, not far from the place Semyon and the boys had gone fishing but a few months before.

At her last shouted words Aleinikov went over to the water and wet his hands, as if washing them after having touched her body. He sat down on a flat stone and said, "Come over here."

She went up to him. He kissed her head and she pressed against him, barely breathing.

"Don't think I don't see and don't know what's happening, Vera. I'm probably happy that you love me."

"Why'd you say 'probably'? Why'd you say that?" she moaned. "It means you ... you...."

"You're wrong. I love you as before. But I ... I don't know how to put it to make you understand. I think that I've only just begun to understand, to really understand the situation. And maybe I don't even really understand it, completely, yet. Give me a little time. I have to see my way clear. Do you understand?"

"Are we going to get married or not?" she asked point-

blank in a very small voice. She was pleased at the way it had sounded.

"Of course we will," he hastened to reply, and the haste with which he did made her realize that now, as never before, they were farther away from getting married than they had been on the day he had come to her parents' house.

She looked at the cold spots of moonlight glittering on the water that so reminded her of the dull gleam of the nickel-plated balls on her bedstead and was overcome by rage.

"I'm sorry, Vera. I think it will all turn out well."

"You think! You're so busy thinking!" she seethed, pushing him away. "Look at you! You'd think I was.... You'd think you were choosing a cow instead of a wife!"

"You're right. I'm all mixed up. And I've gotten you mixed up, too."

"What's so mixed up about it?" She crouched before him, looking up at him devotedly as the tears ran down her cheeks. "You do love me, don't you? Say you do."

"Yes, I do love you, unfortunately."

"And I love you! So what's wrong? What's there to be sorry about? If anybody should be sorry, it's me. Because you're older than me. But I don't care. Because I love you. You know how everybody at the office looks at me? They all know about us. But I don't care."

"I know they do. Kruzhilin even asked me about it."

"They don't ask me. They tried to, but I shut them up quick. Yakov Nikolayevich ... Yakov ... Yasha."

He started and then drew her close when she called him by his first name. "I can imagine how silly I look, Vera. I was the one to come courting you. You're right in shaming me."

"But I'm not."

"I'll speak to my mother. And then we'll get married. I live with my mother. She's a very kind old lady."

As he embraced her she was thinking disgustedly, "Run and talk it over with your granny, too, if she's still around."

Despite the fact that he had said they would get married, it did not cheer Vera up, for she was afraid it was

just a fleeting emotion. Then her thoughts went to Semyon. She decided she would keep seeing him from time to time, just to be on the safe side.

Semyon had been behaving strangely of late. If he bumped into her on the street he'd wave and shout, "Hi, there!" and run on. She could never make him stop, to say nothing of having a talk. That was why, when Kolya had told her the astonishing news of Andrei's disappearance, she had run off to the railroad station to help look for him.

After Semyon had walked out on her, leaving her alone in the waiting room, she had gone over his words again and again. He had said he did not love her and she did not love him, and that she would never be able to love anyone. The words pounded dully in her head. It was a physical sensation. She felt adrift, realizing that she had lost him for good now and had no way of knowing whether Aleinikov would manage to slip off the hook as well. She finally got up from the dirty station bench and trudged off home.

Vera was stunned the next morning when her mother said,

"Pa's run off to the war, too."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Just like Andrei." Her mother began to weep silently as she sank onto the unmade bed. When she had had her cry, she said, "But don't breathe a word of it to anybody. I told his chief he's sick. Pa'll write to the authorities himself, so's they don't get the wrong idea."

They received news of Kirian three weeks later.

It was a cold, windy evening. Aleinikov and Vera were standing by the now-bare birch at the edge of the Gromotushka Bushes where they had had their first rendezvous. Vera was leaning against the small trunk, pulling her warm shawl closer around her. Aleinikov was wearing a coat and hat. He stood beside her, but said nothing.

This was their first date in three weeks. He had begged off every time she had phoned to tell him she wanted to see him. Then he had gone away to the regional center on business, having returned the previous evening.

Vera had phoned him earlier in the day and had burst

into tears over the phone. "We've got to talk it over. Once and for all."

"All right," Aleinikov had said, sighing into the receiver.

Vera had decided to have it out, because the situation was becoming precarious, and Aleinikov, too, was obviously trying to avoid her.

The wind whistled starkly in the bare Gromotushka Bushes, whipping the branches of the little birch and making the trunk sway.

"It's cold. I'm cold," Vera said, unbuttoned his coat and snuggled against him.

Aleinikov drew his coat together over her to shield her from the wind. He embraced her, kissed her head, and asked unexpectedly, "What's happened to your father?"

"My father?" Recalling her mother's admonition, Vera was at a loss to reply and then said, "He's gone off to the front lines."

"I know. But he left in a very strange way. He ran off just like a boy. The chief of the machine and tractor station called me today and said they had thought he was home sick, but that he was actually in action."

"He is?"

"Yes. They had a letter from him."

"I've got to tell Ma. She's been so worried. She's been crying ever since he ran away."

"Why'd he run away?"

"I don't know. He was always a stranger to me. Ma says he's a good man, but I don't know. He and Ma had a funny kind of life."

"Don't they love each other?"

"I don't know. My Ma's...." Vera was about to tell him what little she knew of the relationship between her parents, but then decided it was a long, involved story, and that there was really no need to. "Anyway, I can't understand them. Let's go back."

"Yes, let's. It's a miserable day."

They hardly spoke on the way back to the village. When Vera turned off into Aleinikov's street he was about to say something, but before he had a chance to, she said, "I'll see you home today. You've had a hard day."

They stopped outside the high fence around his small brick house.

"Won't you invite me in?" she asked, aware that she was being very blunt about it. "I'm chilled to the bone. I want to warm up a bit."

"Yes, of course. I was just about to. We have to talk it over. Come in. My mother's sleeping, so we'll have to be quiet." He took out his key ring.

The room he led her to was small and cramped. There were neither carpets nor a chandelier, which she had for some reason or other imagined there would be. True, there was a runner on the floor, but it was old and worn out. A square table covered with a light-blue cloth occupied the center of the room. A desk and divan, an exact copy of the one in Kruzhilin's office, were set against one wall. Next to the divan was a wardrobe, a plain, simple little wardrobe that had probably been made by a local carpenter.

Vera stood in the doorway. She was somewhat taken aback. A bulb with a small frosted glass shade was suspended from the ceiling. Her gaze shifted to the table and the cheap, worn cloth, to the threadbare runner, the cracked oilcloth cover of the divan, the bare, whitewashed walls and something inside her seemed to snap, to cringe and ache, so that tears nearly sprang to her eyes. She felt just as a small child would who had eagerly awaited a promised candy in a bright paper wrapper and, then, when it was finally offered to him, grabbed it to discover there was nothing inside.

"Take off your coat, Vera. Pardon the look of the place. It's probably not too cozy, but I'm used to it."

Aleinikov unbuttoned her coat and she let him take it and her shawl.

"Sit here for a few minutes. I'll put the kettle on." He went off to the kitchen.

Vera sat down on the divan, pressing her knees together. Once again her eyes roamed over the cheap furnishings. What if the tablecloth concealed a fine polished table? She rose and lifted the edge of the cloth. No, the tabletop was plain, painted wood.

She bit her lip and then followed Aleinikov out to the kitchen. He was filling a blue glass sugarbowl with lump

sugar. He smiled at her. His eyes indicated a wooden door, and he whispered,

"My mother finally fell asleep today. Her rheumatism's kept her up the past two nights. You go back inside. I'll get everything myself."

Vera had had no intention of helping him. She had merely wanted to have a look at the kitchen. Nothing in it gladdened her eye, neither the plain, locally-made kitchen table covered with a square of oilcloth, or the cumbersome pine cabinet with several cheap wine glasses and cups behind the glass door, or the clutter of jars, medicine bottles and boxes on the windowsill.

She went back into the room and looked around for a door leading to an adjacent room, but found none. There was only the door they had come through from the small, dark hall. She sat down again. Her heart was beating rapidly. "God, what a fool he is! What a stupid fool!" She fumed as she thought of Aleinikov, of his shaggy brows and his blue scar which was suddenly repulsive and which she had once kissed (the very memory of it made her shudder). "How can he live like this when he could have a grand house?" She jumped up again and strode over to the wardrobe, yanking open the door. Hanging from the rod was Aleinikov's greatcoat, several army shirts and trousers and a winter coat with a good fur collar, at least. The top shelf held a small stack of ironed shirts. That was all. "You just wait! You wait!" she promised vengefully.

Vera closed the door and once again took in the shabby furniture, noticing that although the curtains on the two windows were of silk, they were old and much-laundered. The paint on the window frames was peeling in places, and the legs of the bentwood chairs were scratched, while the seats shone from much wear. She returned to the divan in a daze, saying to herself, "Never mind. Just as long as everything turns out all right, I'll change all this."

Aleinikov came in and set two cups and saucers, and the horrid-looking blue sugarbowl on the table.

"The kettle'll boil in a minute," he said. Then, noticing Vera's expression, he became embarrassed and rubbed his scar. "So you see, this is how I live."

"It's all right," she replied, trying to sound indifferent,

and then shrugged. "I didn't think it'd be like this though," she added. Then, worried lest she had given herself away, she added hastily, "But it's not important."

"When.... I was married, you know. When my wife left me I gave over three rooms to one of our staff. He has a big family, and this is more than enough for my mother and me."

"Sure. I know." She nodded.

"We had a partition put up and another entrance made on the other side of the house. Wait, there's the kettle."

A few minutes later they were seated at the table. Vera was stirring her tea, swallowing the scalding liquid and listening to the gusts of wind.

"It sounds like a real blizzard."

"Don't worry, I'll see you home."

She winced, either at the sound of the trees creaking outside the window or at what he had said. Still she went on making plans. "Never mind. As long as it all turns out like I want it to, we'll move out that man and his big family. And we'll have the partition torn down. And we'll have new furniture. And everyone'll know what Yakov Aleinikov's wife is like. Aleinikov's wife! Everybody'll know. Maybe even Kruzhilin." She thought that she was planning wisely, as a mature person would, who knew what life was all about.

Aleinikov had not touched his tea. He was lost in thought. Vera knew that now was the time to begin this most important conversation, but did not know how to broach the subject. Besides, she was afraid to.

"You probably pay your wife alimony, don't you?" she said, realizing immediately that she had said the wrong thing.

"No," he replied, shaking off his reverie. "I don't even know where she is. She left without telling me where she was going. And she's never written to me once. She doesn't need my help. We had no children. She didn't want any. But I have dependents whom I do help."

"Who?" Vera tried to make her voice sound compassionate.

"I had an elder brother who died of TB six years ago. He got TB when he was imprisoned before the Revolution.

He left four children, and his widow has a bad heart and can't work. I promised him that I'd look after his family." He looked around the room, as if to explain why it was so bare. "My youngest nephew's only eight, and the eldest girl is sixteen. She'll graduate this year. They live very far away, in Vladivostok. I wanted them all to move here to Shantara, so we could all live together, or at least have them near me, but then...."

"But then you fell in love with me," she prompted with an unpleasantly ingratiating smile. "But that won't change anything. You should have them here."

"What I wanted to say was: but then war broke out," he said dryly. There was a short pause. He leaned back in his chair and when he spoke his voice was strange and alien, "Vera...."

She jumped to her feet, nearly overturning her cup in her haste. "Wait, Yakov! I want to...." She felt all choked up and could not utter a word. Icy fingers of fear gripped at her entrails. There could be no doubt about it: this was the end!

"Don't, Vera. Don't say anything." Aleinikov hung his head guiltily. "I'm the one who should, who must speak, no matter how unpleasant it is. I can't marry you, Vera."

No longer was this merely surmise. He had actually spoken the fatal words. "It's the end! The end!" she kept repeating to herself, while everything inside her rose up in protest.

"What did you say, Yakov? "

"I want you to forgive me, Vera. Try to understand me. We can't ... I can't marry you."

A dense fog shot through with blinding firebolts enveloped her. Anger, hurt and uncontrollable rage seemed to fill her body with something that was highly explosive. The thoughts that flashed through her mind were like red-hot coals giving off blue tongues of flame. If only one of those little coals rolled any closer, there would be a shattering explosion. Fearing this, she backed away to the divan, collapsed upon it, turned her face to the wall and rolled up into a ball, as if she was cold. She gave vent to her tears. Aleinikov came over and then sat down on the edge of the divan. He put his hand on her shoulder and

said something. She threw back her head and shouted hoarsely,

"Is this final? "

"Yes. I've been thinking about it all this time. Yes, it's final."

Vera covered her face and moaned. He got up and walked around the table, bumping into the chairs.

* * *

The fifty years of his life had been hard ones for Yakov Aleinikov. There had been a time when everything had been so clear and simple, with the world divided into friends and enemies as distinctly as day is from night. He had had a very good idea of who he was and of his place on earth, of what he was to do and in the name of what he was to live.

Gradually, things became more complex, and his life more confused. Each twenty-four hours was still made up of night and day, and his goal was as clear as ever, but he could not understand why many of his former friends were becoming his enemies.

He began to think seriously of this after his wife left him in the winter of 1936, having said in parting,

"I'm not leaving you because I've stopped loving you. Perhaps I still do. But you've become a monster. I'm terrified of sleeping in the same bed with you." She had burst into tears then and left, taking only a small bag containing her clothes. He never saw her again, but her last words kept ringing in his ears. At first, this irritated him. It enraged him. In time he was able to think about it more calmly as he tried to understand why she had said what she had, of all the other things she might have said in parting.

Was he really sending innocent men to prison? Say, Ivan Savelyev, for instance? His conscience had been clear when he had arrested that former Whiteguard bandit. Sensing his imminent doom, Ivan had resorted to cunning back in 1919. He had decided to save his own skin by bringing in his chief's body, and so he had shot Kaftanov and freed his daughter Anna, bringing both with him when



he had showed up in the partisan camp. Kruzhillin, the partisan commander, Anna and many others had in the end believed that Ivan had been sincere. But he, Aleinikov, and Ivan's brother Fyodor had never trusted him. And they had been right. Ivan had not laid down his arms. He had not accepted the new regime, as was borne out when he stole those two horses, probably in order to get back at the Soviet State in any way he could.

Arkady Molchanov, a collective farmer from Mikhailovka Village, had been Ivan's staunchest supporter. But what if he had been more than that? What if he was an accomplice as well? Besides, while still in preliminary detention, Arkady had begun slandering the Soviet regime. What was Aleinikov to do? Let him out, so that he could go on defending enemies of the State, aiding and abetting them, and slandering the Government?

When had the evidence against Ivan Savelyev and Arkady Molchanov begun to seem flimsy and naive to him, and then simply downright stupid?

Be that as it may, something had come over him. He had become revolted at having suddenly glimpsed himself from a different angle. It was a very strange and complex feeling, as if there were now suddenly two of him, with one caught in the beam of an invisible spotlight and the other standing beside him in the shadows, staring at his twin in wonder, disgust and fear.

With each passing month he was becoming more and more gray. Then he began losing his hair, until he had a visible bald pate. He was becoming ever more morose. His eyes became more sunken still beneath his shaggy brows, and the ugly scar on his cheek acquired a deadly blueness. Whenever he became irritated or enraged it would swell and become blue-black, making his sullen face hideous.

More and more often would he catch himself thinking that he was a bastard, and that the day would come when he would be brought to account for his criminal actions. Yes, the day would come, and when it did it would bring him relief at last. Forever. But when would that be? And would it not be better to give himself this relief as a gift now, and not wait for that day?

He began thinking of suicide.

The idea first occurred to him late in 1938, shortly after Vasily Zasukhin, in charge of the local trades industries of the district, and Danila Koshkin, Chairman of the district department of revenue, had been arrested.

Arriving at his office on that day long ago, he had had the two men brought into his office, but only after he had issued the order did he wonder why he wanted to see them.

The arrested men were brought in. Both were handcuffed. In the several hours that had elapsed since their arrest they had both acquired a drawn look. Koshkin's mouth turned down contemptuously when he stared at Aleinikov, as if to say, "Well, Yakov, you've just about hit bottom, haven't you?" Zasukhin, however, was staring at his hands, as if he still could not understand why he was handcuffed.

Aleinikov ordered their handcuffs removed.

"Much obliged," Koshkin said sarcastically. "Now, can you tell us what crime we've committed and what sort of sabotage we've been accused of? Are we supposed to be saboteurs? Do you think we might have been plotting to blow up the bridge across the Gromotukha? Or maybe you think I set fire to that shop that burned down?"

"You can tell the court what it was yourselves," Aleinikov said, speaking with difficulty. "You'll be told what the charges are by the proper authorities. I wanted to ask you something else. I have a feeling you both ... sort of expected to be arrested."

"Of course we did. We're the ones who speak up the loudest in the district now," Zasukhin replied.

"Well, then, if you know it, why'd you have to be so loud-mouthed?"

"I don't really know how to make you understand." The sarcasm was still there. "Maybe you have a try at it, Danilo."

"I think I will," Koshkin said, nodded and rubbed his wrists. "It's this way, Yakov Nikolayevich. Back in the times of the Civil War, death had an arm around us every day, what with bullets whizzing over our heads and swords flashing by our faces. So close, in fact, that we could feel it's cold breath. But I'm sure you remember that as well as

we do. We never worried about saving our skins then, either, because we knew what we were fighting for and what the reckoning might be." Koshkin suddenly rose from his chair to his full towering height, becoming the mighty Danilo of his youth, and began pacing up and down, his movements as awkward as a crane's, gesticulating as he spoke. "Do you actually think we've suddenly become cowards now, Yakov? Polipov's wrecking the district. Do you expect us to keep quiet about it? You want us to tie ourselves into knots? What was it we were risking our lives for all those years? Hm? How do you expect us to look at our own faces in the mirror? Hm? I mean look ourselves in the eye! "

Danilo Koshkin pounded up and down the room, his voice booming, his words like heavy paving stones rolling off in all directions so that it seemed as if he was the master of this large office with its tall windows, and not Aleinikov who appeared to be cringing behind his desk.

"You say he doesn't understand you?" Koshkin bellowed, stopping in front of Zasukhin and jabbing his thumb in Aleinikov's direction. Then, rushing over to Yakov, he spread his arms wide and gripped the edges of his desk, as if he would raise it up and bring it down on Aleinikov's head. "So you don't understand? Oh, yes, you do! You understand everything that's going on, Yakov! You know damn well you're sending innocent men off to jail! Why'd you arrest Kornei Baulin? You know he's no enemy of the people! Zasukhin and I were right here in your office then, trying to make you understand that. And now you've finally got around to us! And what do you know? You have the gall to ask us why we're so loud-mouthed! "

Aleinikov looked at them uncomprehendingly. He brought his cold hands up to his throbbing temples. He pressed a button and, avoiding their eyes, told the guard to take them away.

Aleinikov spent many a sleepless night after that. Many a time in the dead of night, or as dawn was breaking, he would get up from his crumpled bed and pull his gun from its holster with hands that trembled disgustingly as the cold metal burned him. Then, holding the gun until the

handle had become warm, he would thrust it back into the holster or stuff it under his pillow to have it close at hand, just in case.

What had restrained him from taking his own life?

The answer was to be found on a warm day in April, when the snow had melted, the spring flood-waters had disappeared and the ground was dry, when the sparrows, gone wild from the warmth of the sun, were chirping madly outside his window, and the buds on the trees were swollen and ready to burst, to throw out their first small, sticky leaves. On that day the senior investigator came to report that, according to information received from Anikei Yelizarov, not even half of the tractors at the machine and tractor station were in good repair, although this was the end of April, and that Fyodor Savelyev was saying for all to hear that there was no sense in even trying to repair such junk, for it wouldn't do any good anyway.

"Which means he's purposely trying to undermine morale. And last summer he nearly ruined a combine harvester. Which means he's acting according to some sinister plan," the investigator said, compressing his harsh lips.

"What're you talking about?" Aleinikov said and winced. "I'm a member of the District Committee Bureau, and I know the situation at the machine and tractor station. The tractors are all on their last legs, and there aren't any spare parts. That's why they're in such a state. And Savelyev's right. There's nothing but a pile of junk. As for the fire on the combine, you know we investigated it. The only thing that burned was the trailer."

"That was because it started to rain. If not for the rain, the combine would've burned, and the rye would've caught fire."

"But what does Savelyev have to do with it?" Aleinikov exclaimed irritably.

The fire had occurred at the beginning of the haying season. It was a freak accident. Lighting struck the trailer which was piled high with straw. It had been a hot, murky morning. Then heavy, low rainclouds had covered the sky. Fyodor had been mowing since dawn. Every now and then he would look up at the clouds that were drifting out from

beyond Zvenigora, hoping that the wind would dispell them. However, the breeze that had blown up died down, and the first rolls of thunder rumbled in the distance. The sky was suddenly cleaved overhead, and a scorching flash of lightning blinded him momentarily. Fyodor crouched on the bridge and clapped his hands over his eyes. He dropped them at the sound of Kirian Iniutin's scream and then saw Kirian race past the combine. At first Fyodor thought a column of fire was shooting up from the combine.

Two girls had been working on the trailer. One was killed outright and the other was stunned. Both were thrown to the ground. By the time Fyodor jumped down, Kirian had grabbed one of the girls and was dragging her over the stubble and away from the fire. Fyodor was still dazed. He grabbed the other girl and threw her as far as he could from the combine. Then he shouted to Kirian,

"Hurry! Get back to the tractor! Pull us away! The rye'll catch fire! "

Kirian drove the combine off about fifty meters and then cut the motor. Fyodor, meanwhile, was trying to uncouple the trailer, but by now it was blazing like a torch. As he shielded his face from the heat, he tried unsuccessfully to knock the pin out with a wrench. Meanwhile, Kirian, having decided that Fyodor had uncoupled the trailer, had started up the motor again. The combine began moving, dragging its fiery tail behind it. Fyodor jumped out from under the moving wheels and yelled,

"Stop! Stop! "

Clumps of burning straw were falling off the blazing trailer. The flames skipped along the stubble as a light breeze that had appeared from nowhere fanned the fire towards the standing rye. Fyodor began stamping out the fiery trickles in an attempt to snuff out the fire.

Kirian ran up, shouting, "I thought you knocked the pin out! "

Together the two men tried to uncouple the trailer, but they were too late. By now the flames were licking at the iron sides of the combine.

Another combine had been working on an adjacent strip. The second combine's team, with Anikei Yelizarov

out in front, was running towards them.

When Anikei reached them his narrow tongue darted across his dry lips and his mean eyes bored into Fyodor and Kirian. "Look what you've done! "

Fyodor ignored him. He was stamping out the running strips of flame in the stubble, beating them out with his jacket.

"We'll lose the combine, Fyodor! " Kirian shouted. "The paint's blistering! "

"To hell with it! We've got to save the rye! We've got to stamp out the fire! "

Kirian, Yelizarov, the second team all joined in to fight the fire that was spreading so quickly.

Who knows how it all would have ended, for the rye had come up tall and close that year. It was so dry now it burned like gunpowder. The reapers were choked by smoke. Their feet and legs were burning hot, and they were no match for the fire. The first tiny white tongues had now reached the very edge of the standing rye. In another instant it had become bloody red and swollen in two or three spots. The roaring inferno was now devouring the tall stalks. Fire and black, billowing clouds of smoke soared upward, spreading the bitter smell of burned grain.

A moment later a sudden cloudburst put out the fire in seconds. The downpour was over as suddenly as it had begun, and the sun came out again, shining down upon the small black inroads the fire had made at the edge of the rye, upon the remains of the charred trailer and the drenched men and women.

One of the second team's helpers exclaimed, "You and Kirian were both born under a lucky star. Just think: you were nearly hit by a bolt of lightning! "

"Yes, it really is something to think about. I mean, whether it was lightning or not," Yelizarov said and smiled a mean little smile. "The authorities will get to the bottom of it."

He said no more, for at that very moment Kirian, who was trying to rouse the two girls who were still lying in the wet stubble nearby, shouted,

"Fyodor! Everybody! The thunder killed Katya! "

This was as it had actually happened. Aleinikov had

personally conducted the investigation, and the medical examiner had stated that the girl had been killed by lightning. The senior investigator knew all this, but still continued speaking of a plot.

"What're you trying to pin on Fyodor Savelyev?" Aleinikov demanded.

The investigator shrugged. "You know the higher-ups in the regional department won't understand us. Fyodor Savelyev is married to the daughter of a former kulak. His brother was convicted as an enemy of the people. Fyodor's been a childhood friend of Kirian Iniutin. And Iniutin's father was a bandit."

Aleinikov slapped his desktop lightly and rose. "Naturally, how they understand us is most important, but don't you think it's more important to see how we ourselves understand the people? I mean, what our approach to Fyodor Savelyev or Kirian Iniutin is. And what our approach to life in general is?"

As Aleinikov spoke, he was thinking that if not for him both Savelyev and Iniutin would probably be in trouble. At that very moment, neither sooner nor later, he suddenly realized what it was that had restrained him from committing suicide. Now at last he understood Zasukhin's words: "It'll be the most stupid thing you could do now. I mean now." It was as if a shade had suddenly been raised and sunlight had blinded him.

He sank down into his chair and looked around his office, as though seeing it for the first time. Indeed, sunlight was streaming in through every window, lighting up the darkest corners. He was alone in his office. He had not noticed the senior investigator leaving. Sparrows were chirping loudly outside. A poplar branch covered with bursting buds was scratching faintly against the pane. Aleinikov rose and went over to the window. The buds had burst. The bulging buds had still been black and shiny that morning, but now, unable to withstand the pressure of the light-giving sun, the tips had spread and become fuzzy, and pale green feelers had peeped out from within the sticky, mysterious depths.

That evening Aleinikov came to the Gromotukha. The river was still ice-bound, although there was an edge of

water along the bank. The porous ice looked swollen and blue, and seemed ready to crack at any moment.

He walked along the bank, crunching over the pebbles, and continued on beyond the village without any definite goal in mind. He walked on, breathing in the chill, tangy air of the April evening mixed with the smell of thawing earth, swollen buds and river ice softened by the spring sun. He walked on, noticing the evening mist rising in the upper reaches of the river, making the distance seemed much shorter, concealing the small island in the middle of the river and the trees and bushes that grew there. He was thinking that in the morning the fog would lift. It would furl away, revealing the far distances, while the trees on the island would appear in ever sharper focus, as on a developed print.

* * *

Aleinikov walked around and around the table dazedly, stumbling over the chairs, while Vera lay stretched out stiffly on the divan, staring hatefully at him, although he took her expression to be grief. She was overcome by bitterness and rage, although he thought her heart was breaking.

Yakov Aleinikov was a very poor judge of women. In his youth he had never had any trouble striking up acquaintances, and if a new acquaintance did not put up too much resistance, he'd have an affair until he tired of her. He would then part without regrets, and soon a new woman would blot out the memory of the previous one.

In time the lack of a cozy home and his bachelor life began to irritate him. During one of his business trips to Novosibirsk Aleinikov met Galina Fedoseyevna, a doctor. He corresponded with her for over a year, asked her to marry him in one of his letters, and then brought her to Shantara.

He thought he loved her and explained away the little attention he gave her by the fact that his difficult job was extremely demanding.

After she left him he realized that he had never really

loved her. He had simply gotten used to her. It was very convenient to have a woman in the house who cooked, cleaned and slept with him. Aleinikov fell in love for the first time in his life when he saw the new District Committee typist.

Why had this happened when he was fifty years old? Why had he fallen in love with a girl who was thirty years his junior?

These were questions that bothered him. He would ask himself why, and the answers that came to him were simple, perhaps too simple. He had fallen in love with her, because she was young and beautiful, while he was old and bone-weary. He was confused and had made a terrible mess of his life. It seemed to him that Vera was the one person, the one woman, who would warm him, body and soul, who would thaw his frozen heart, so that his sullenness and feeling of alienation would vanish at last.

Was he bothered by the difference in their ages? Yes, but there was nothing he could do about it. He decided to approach her.

Actually, he had not hoped for success. Yet, when he saw that there was hope, his doubts were dispelled and forgotten, albeit not completely. As his relationship with Vera became more defined, as the possibility of marriage to this girl, something he had so desired, became a reality, his former doubts reappeared.

"What am I doing? What sort of a husband will I be? In another five or ten years I'll be an old man. I'll ruin her life. She's too young to understand it now." Such were his thoughts during his sleepless nights.

Still and all, Aleinikov felt that this was not the actual reason behind his doubts and indecisiveness. "Am I really looking for escape in the right place, for warmth that will thaw and gladden my heart? And can it be thawed in such a way after everything that's happened? And if not, how can it be? And where? "

Having once materialized, these thoughts gave him no peace.

Perhaps this explains why Yakov Aleinikov, a man who was nobody's fool and who had been through a lot in his life time, could not see through this saucy girl or under-

stand the true meaning of her words when even an inexperienced boy like Semyon Savelyev apparently did.

Aleinikov finally stopped pacing and sat down on the edge of the divan again. He put out his hand to stroke her shoulder, but she jerked and sat up quickly.

"Don't touch me!" she shouted, pressing her hands to her flaming cheeks.

"I know I've caused you a lot of pain," he said with difficulty, sensing that this was not the thing to say. "I love you more than ever. But what can I do? I can't marry you. You're much too young for me. But that's not the main point."

She jumped up, pulled her coat off the peg and began tying her shawl on feverishly.

"I'll see you home, Vera."

"Don't!" she cried, flashing a look of such hatred at him it made him back away. "I can manage without you!"

He accepted what she had said and how she had said it as his due.

* * *

For the next three weeks Vera tried unsuccessfully to accost Semyon on the street, although she did not really know what she would say to him, or why she wanted to see him.

One evening she went to the movies. It was a long and dreary film, and when the lights went on at the end of one of the reels she suddenly spotted Semyon. He was sitting up ahead, talking to another boy.

After the movie ended Vera hung behind at the entrance.

"Hello, Semyon," she said meekly when he came through the doorway. "If you're going home, we can walk together."

"Oh, hello."

They stood there in embarrassed silence for a few moments.

"I see he can't find the courage to take the plunge,"

the boy who had been sitting next to Semyon said. "But I'm a real daredevil. How do you do? My name's Yura." He proffered his hand.

Yura was standing in the strip of light that came from the door. A shock of blond hair protruded from under his fur hat and all but concealed his eyes.

Vera took an instant dislike to him. She thought his lips were too stubborn, his eyes too sharp. They seemed to be undressing her. Besides, she was in a bad mood.

"I can see you are," she snapped and turned on her heel.

"Oho. Pardon me," he replied and disappeared in the crowd. Vera did not know whether he had said it mockingly or disappointedly.

Vera and Semyon walked down the dark street in silence. The frost was not too severe, but it made their cheeks tingle. The frozen snow crunched underfoot.

"Here we are," Vera said when they had reached her house. She suddenly sobbed and leaned her head against the cold cloth of his jacket. "Forgive me, Semyon."

"Quit it! I thought we had this all settled."

"You know, it was like a trance. I was in a trance. You know girls don't have any brains. I'm to blame for everything. And you can swear at me, or even hit me if you want to. But everything's clear now. I know I never loved anybody except you. Nobody but you! Aleinikov wanted me to marry him. He begged me to on bended knee. It went to my head. I know I was stupid. But the more he begged me, the more I thought of you. God, how many nights I've stayed up, thinking about all this! You don't know how I've tortured myself for treating you the way I did! But I don't want you to think I ever let him touch me."

"I don't," he said, managing to break away from her at last. "You're playing for high stakes."

"Sure, make fun of me. You have a right to." She swallowed hard. "But my body's pure."

"And what about your conscience?"

"What about it? My conscience is clear, if anyone takes the trouble to try and understand me."

"Let's say I have."

"So that's it! My mother's been giving you an earfull, hasn't she? She said she would."

Semyon went through the low gate and slammed it shut behind him. "You shouldn't have been so rude to Yura," he said sarcastically. "After all, he's the director's son."

Vera's eyebrows went up. Semyon noticed it, smiled again and went indoors.

Vera ran up her porch steps in a rage and began hammering and kicking at the locked door.

"What's the matter? Are you crazy?" her mother exclaimed, unlocking it. "You'll wake Kolya up."

Vera darted by into the dark pantry. Then she clattered and banged about in her tiny room, slamming the doors of her wardrobe, moving things back and forth.

"Can't you be quiet?" Anfisa whispered from her bed.

Vera struck her hand against the double wooden door, making both panels fly open. She stood on the threshold in her nightgown. Her hair was dishevelled. "So you went and talked to Semyon, didn't you?" she shouted in a choked voice, drawing her bursting nightgown across her chest. "What'd you tell him about me? What'd you say?"

"Don't be an idiot," Anfisa replied calmly.

"All right," Vera was suffocated by rage. "All right! "

* * *

The Regional Party Committee bureau met early in the morning of December 13 to discuss the work of the Shantara District Committee over the past year. The meeting did not end until late afternoon. The decision which was adopted noted that the Party Organization of Shantara, working under the difficult conditions of wartime, had successfully directed the harvesting and the reconstruction of the evacuated war plant which was now in operation. These two facts were of such importance that the discussion of Nazarov's unplanned sowing of half of the Red Wheat collective Farm's fields to rye, something which Kruzhilin had looked forward to with marked uneasiness, was done in passing. True, Polipov tried to draw the

members' attention to the question by saying, "Such wilfulness sets a bad example for the other farms and may produce very unfavorable results."

However, this made no impression. Subbotin was the only one to say,

"I visited the Red Wheat Farm and looked into the matter. I want to report that the rye yield is one-and-a-half and even two times as great as the wheat crop there. Besides, Nazarov's farm has delivered more grain to the State this year than any other farm in the district, and this is due primarily to the rye crop. Am I right, Nazarov?"

Pankrat Nazarov, who had been asked to attend the meeting, replied, "Yes. It's been a good harvest this year. It got us out of the hole." He turned red as he tried to stifle his cough.

"There, see? Every extra kilo of grain is worth its weight in gold now. I say we should keep an eye on Nazarov's farm for a year or two and see how the experiment works, and then...."

The door burst open, and the First Secretary's assistant rushed in to whisper something in his ear.

"Comrades!" the Regional Secretary said, rising and holding up his hand for Subbotin to stop speaking. "There's been a most important news dispatch, comrades!" He was a big, heavy-set man, but he kicked away his chair and rushed over to the loudspeaker that was attached to the wall near a high, narrow window and switched it on.

The announcer was saying:

"Following is a dispatch from the Soviet Information Bureau. The German plan for surrounding and capturing Moscow has failed. The German forces have been routed at the approaches to Moscow."

The voice was slow and solemn. The announcer spoke loudly, and his words filled the conference room. No one moved a muscle. The announcer seemed in no hurry to continue. He paused, as if to let what he had said sink in. Then, continuing in the same tone of voice, he finally said,

"Beginning with November 16, 1941, the German forces, bringing up 13 tank, 33 infantry and 5 motor-in-

fantry divisions against our Western Front, launched a second general offensive on Moscow. The enemy's goal was to penetrate into our rear by a pincer action, to surround and take Moscow. They intended to occupy Tula, Kashira, Ryazan and Kolomna in the south, then Klin, Solnechnogorsk, Rogachev, Yakhroma and Dmitrov in the north, and then push on to Moscow from three directions and capture the city."

Kruzhilin felt his forehead become damp from the strain of listening. His heart began to ache. But, as everyone else present, he was afraid to breathe, as if the slightest movement might suddenly cut off the announcer's voice.

However, he continued as before, "On December 6, 1941, the troops of our Western Front, having exhausted the enemy during previous battles, launched a counter-offensive against the two German shock units on our flanks. As a result of our advance, both of these units have been routed. They are retreating, sustaining tremendous losses, and leaving arms and ammunition in their wake."

The strain had become unbearable. The announcer's last sentence was drowned out by wild applause. Chairs scraped, everyone rose and began speaking excitedly.

"Comrades! Comrades! " the First Secretary boomed, raising both hands for silence. "The meeting has not yet been adjourned."

When order had been more or less restored he said crossly,

"Let's not have any more of this childish excitement." Although he had spoken sharply, his eyes were laughing, so in order to hide his smile he knitted his brows and stared at the papers on his desk.

Silence was restored. The First Secretary ran his hand over his face, glanced at the silent loudspeaker and smiled shyly and rather guiltily as he said,

"At last, my friends. This is the beginning of our final victory. Congratulations, everybody."

There was a burst of applause.

"The Germans have been driven back from Moscow! They've been routed! " the First Secretary suddenly exclaimed with childish awe and they all saw that this ever-serious and harrassed man was actually still very young.

Kruzhilin suddenly imagined that he probably liked to go fishing, that he enjoyed a sunset, that he liked a drink of vodka as he sat by a campfire on a hunting trip.

The First Secretary seemed embarrassed by his outburst. He picked up a sheet of paper containing the draft resolution and addressed Subbotin, "Is there anything else you wanted to say?"

"No, I believe that was all."

"The enemy has been driven away from our capital, the most formidable enemy Russia ever had in all its history. There is a small drop of our effort in this victory, too. Of everyone's effort, including Comrade Kruzhilin and Comrade Nazarov. Has everyone studied the draft resolution? Are there any objections? Any corrections?"

Nothing else was said of Nazarov and his "wilfulness".

As the members filed out of the conference room and into the wide corridor, Polipov said to Kruzhilin, avoiding his eyes,

"You got the upper hand this time. You've knocked me down, but not out."

"Listen! What sort of boxing terms are you using?"

"It's not a matter of terms. Did you notice? The Secretary expressed no opinion of Nazarov. Give that some thought. There's not a word about him in the resolution, either."

"Are you trying to teach me how to conduct my Party work again?"

"No, because there's no profit in it for me."

They were walking down the stairs, and Polipov's last words brought Kruzhilin to a halt. However, Polipov continued,

"Don't you understand? Or are you pretending not to? No, I'm not teaching you. It's just a little friendly warning. So you'd better watch your step from now on, and keep your eyes open. If Nazarov's rye crop fails next year..."

"Then you'll get even with no for everything. Is that it?"

"Maybe I will," Polipov replied frankly. "But don't worry. You have nothing to worry about anymore." And he ran down the stairs, hunching his broad shoulders.

Kruzhilin had a glass of tepid tea in the canteen, went back upstairs and dropped in to see Subbotin.

The fairly large office was brightly lit. Subbotin rose when Kruzhilin entered and said,

"Congratulations! "

"What for? "

"You mean you don't know? Don't tell me they've been praising you all day and you never noticed? Besides, the resolution isn't bad at all."

"I know."

"I see. You'd have preferred to have Nazarov mentioned in it. Is that it? "

"Yes. After all, Nazarov and I have launched something new. If it's to the detriment of the country, we should be reprimanded, but if it's to the good, something should have been said as well."

"That's what's still hard to decide. As I said at the meeting, we won't really know the results for another year or two. As soon as we do we'll certainly present our views."

"And meanwhile Polipov'll be trying to blackmail me. He's already put it in so many words. Meaning he's just waiting for Nazarov's rye crop to fail."

"I see. So you've come here to complain? " Subbotin's eyes glinted.

"No. But I'd like to ask you why I have to worry about Polipov tripping me up instead of devoting myself completely to the affairs of the district? "

"You really do, but more than worry. You've got to knock Polipov and his likes down first."

"So that's how you put it. But I can't understand...."

"Then I'll explain."

A heavy truck rumbled by making the windowpanes rattle. Subbotin listened to it pass and then continued.

"We're a lot like that truck that just passed: chugging along, carrying our loads, while men like Polipov have found themselves a cozy seat in the cab and are riding along in comfort instead of getting out and pushing. And while they're riding along so blithely, they keep issuing orders: turn off to the left here! Turn off to the right there! They've found out long ago that it's much easier to

ride along in the cab."

"But if that's the case and we know it, why should we have to keep an eye out all the time and hope they won't cause any harm? We should kick them out of the cab and keep them out! Kick them right under the wheels."

"What do you think we're doing? Think back to what Polipov was. And what is he now?"

"I see. We toss them out, but we've got to make sure they don't get hurt by mistake. In fact, we don't even toss them out. We tearfully beg them to please climb down. Then we wait around patiently until Pyotr Petrovich finally decides that maybe he will. It'll be a long, long wait."

"Yes, it will!" Subbotin rose and began pacing up and down. "The struggle against men like Polipov will be hard and drawn-out, and don't you forget it for a moment! What did you think? Some people tried to get rid of him in a single shove, but what happened to them?"

"Meaning?" Kruzhilin said in a barely audible whisper. "What do you mean?"

It was pitch dark outside. Here and there a street light shone dimly. Subbotin pulled the heavy drapes across the windows. It was obvious that he did not intend to answer Kruzhilin's questions.

"But then.... Who is Polipov then?"

"You want to know who he is? If only there was an easy answer. I can tell you have one on the tip of your tongue."

"I do, but I'm afraid to say it. It's a terrible word."

"Then don't. One thing can easily lead to another, you know."

There was a long pause as they both shared the same thought, not knowing how to continue or whether there was a need to. Finally, Subbotin said,

"He's simply become a bastard with a Party card in his pocket. But how can we prove it? He's nobody's fool. I remember several months ago you told me you felt you couldn't meet the deadline for putting the plant into operation. Remember?"

"Yes."

"Well, then. Polipov kept hammering home this information every time he spoke to the regional authorities,

including me. Say that I knew why he was doing it. But what about the others? Taking an official view of it, he was right. I'd have liked to see you try to prove he was slandering you then! Or take the present situation. I included a few sentences about Nazarov in the draft resolution in order to somehow shield you, if I may say so, and give your actions the appearance of having received official sanction. But the First Secretary crossed them out."

"I see he's a very cautious man," Kruzhilin said sadly.

"He is. And Polipov was the first to sense it and figure out how he could put it to his own advantage whenever the chance presented itself."

Subbotin, a tall, lanky man, kept pacing up and down. His shadow flitted over the smooth walls, the draped windows and the freshly-polished, slippery floor, now growing small, now becoming so tall it touched the ceiling.

"What kind of a creature did our Party produce?"

Subbotin glanced at Kruzhilin sharply. Several deep furrows appeared on his brow. Then they disappeared, and his deep-set gray eyes became sad. "An unsightly one," he said in an undertone and ruefully. He sat down at his desk again, but did not sit up straight. He was leaning sideways and staring off into a corner, as if expecting something to appear there, perhaps a mouse. "We keep forgetting something we never should, Polikarp Matveyevich, and that's that the Revolution only took place twenty-four years ago."

"No one has forgotten that! "

"Naturally, we all remember the date. But do we always bear in mind the fact that a very short period of time has elapsed since then and that the revolution is not over, that it is continuing still? Understand? The old way of life, the old regime and its social structure that were formed over the centuries were blown up in 1917. The Revolution brought the old ways to a state of utter confusion.

"Try to imagine a stagnant, stinking swamp with decaying water weeds, branches, tree-trunks and the decomposing bodies of animals. Then suddenly powerful fountains of spring water begin shooting up from the middle of the swamp. All this decaying mass, this slimy

and slippery mess, these rotting bodies are set into motion, now surfacing, now sinking again. And this refuse will be bobbing around for a long time to come until it is finally cast up on the bank. But even there the putrid mess will continue to poison the air until it finally decomposes completely.

"Soon the former swamp becomes transformed into a clear lake with blossoming banks, but every now and then there'll be a whiff of something rotten in the air. Just imagine how long it'll take till everything that was in the swamp turns to dust! And then how long more it'll take for the wind to carry off the dust. Something akin to this is now going on in the depths of our society. The swamp hasn't been completely transformed into a lake yet, into something that will be a joy to the eye and the senses. There's still a lot of human rottenness that must yet be cast up on the bank. In a word, we're still a far way from reaching this idyllic lake. I repeat: are we always aware of this? Do we always have a clear understanding of this?"

Kruzhilin rose heavily, straightened up with difficulty, went over to the window, moved the drape aside slightly and gazed out at the dark street. The wind was blowing, making the electric street lights sway so that bright spots of light moved back and forth across the trampled snow.

"You're right," he said, still staring out the window. "Our Party never produced them. We got them ready-made."

"Now do you understand why you and I, and all of us have to knock them over and out?" Subbotin replied quickly.

Another heavy-laden truck rumbled by. Kruzhilin waited until the pound of its motor died away to ask,

"Then tell me this: was everything that happened in '36 and '37 the work of men like Polipov and nothing else?"

"That's a hard one. Why don't you ask me something easier?" Subbotin said gloomily, but the sarcasm in his voice was evident.

"I see." Now Kruzhilin began walking up and down. "You're right about knocking them out. Because they've apparently had a hand in it, too. That's a conclusion I've

come to of late. I want to add that at the same time other people should be helped to keep their balance, or even to be picked up from the ground."

Subbotin waited for him to continue.

"You may be right about the swamp. At any rate, you described it vividly enough. As for the depths of human society, though, I think the question's much more involved. You can't draw a simple comparison, because there are other things to be found there besides a rotting mess and carcasses: the debris of all kinds of human lives. There are people in our society who are basically decent but who were confused by the social upheavals and changes, and broke under the strain, people who don't understand the meaning of the revolution yet, who don't understand the times. Many made a mistake in the first turbulent years and now don't know how to remedy it or whether it can ever be remedied. Finally, there are honest people who've never come out against our way of life, but who simply haven't found their place in the new society yet."

Subbotin stacked his papers, put them in his desk drawer and locked it.

"Don't you agree? "

"I'm glad you understand the situation, but enough philosophizing. Let's move on to the matters at hand. Can you tell me which of your staff at the District Committee would be a suitable replacement for the Chairman of the District Executive Committee? "

"But what about Polipov? Is he being transferred? "

"He's transferring himself. He's volunteered for active service. If that'll make you any happier."

"Wait a second! But I also...." Kruzhilin stopped short, as if afraid of saying more than he had intended to.

"Also what? " Subbotin looked up sharply and then sat back in his chair. "Wait a minute now."

Kruzhilin trudged back to the armchair. It creaked as he sat down.

"Let's have a clean breast of it," Subbotin said and his voice was both cold and mocking.

When Kruzhilin had first entered Subbotin's office he had intended to sound Subbotin out and see what the Regional Committee's reaction would be if he were to

volunteer for active service. As they had spoken of the meeting that had just ended and of Polipov, he had wondered how to start the conversation that had brought him there. Now, however, when the subject had been broached, he did not know how to continue it. Subbotin's initial reaction had made things clear enough to him.

"Try to understand me, Ivan Mikhailovich," Kruzhilin began uncertainly and stared at the floor. Just a moment before he had had several impressive arguments at the tip of his tongue, but then they suddenly seemed to have evaporated. What he said now was, "My son's been killed in action."

"Have you received a death notice?"

"No. But I know Vasily was killed."

"I did."

"What?"

"My three boys were called up for active service. The youngest was killed. When I came to the district last fall I had the notice in my pocket. We received it just before I was to leave." Subbotin's lips barely moved as he spoke. His fingers kept twirling the metal top of his glass inkwell. He was staring off into a corner again, but now his eyes were blank.

Subbotin seemed to come back to reality with a start. He stared at the metal cap in surprise and replaced it on the inkwell with a soft clink.

"So whom would you recommend as a replacement for Polipov?" He fixed his eyes on Kruzhilin. Polikarp Matveyevich sensed this. He felt Subbotin's eyes forcing him to raise his head, and he did.

"I'd recommend Khokhlov. Ivan Ivanovich Khokhlov, the former chief engineer of the plant before it became a war plant. He's an excellent man, and they can do without him now."

Subbotin did not reply. He seemed to be thinking about something else. Then he said, "What about replacing the missing members of the District Committee bureau? Have you given it any thought? After all, three men were called up."

"Yes, I have. I'd suggest Anton Savelyev, the plant director. And now Khokhlov. And maybe.... This might

seem strange to you, but I was thinking about Yakov Aleinikov."

"Oh?" Subbotin squinted. "At any rate, he's an interesting candidate. How is he, by the way?"

"Forever solemn and as black as a cloud. I keep feeling more and more convinced that he's all mixed up and looking for a way out, but can't find it yet. He fell in love this fall."

"No! "

"Yes. The girl's our District Committee typist. He used to run off on dates like a kid, and mostly after dark, thinking no one would ever catch on, but everyone in the district knew all about it. Then he came to his senses. After all, he's fifty and she's only twenty."

"So that's the kind of affair it was."

"Don't jump to conclusions. I think he felt he'd found a way out, but then saw it was no solution, really. I think it's all over between them, but I have a feeling he's more depressed than ever now."

"So you say Yakov Aleinikov? Yakov Aleinikov." Subbotin stared at him hard. "Which means you don't bear him a grudge."

Polikarp Matveyevich smiled with his lips alone. His eyes remained cold. "I know, it's always hard to answer a silly question. But do you think the members of the District Committee will understand you?"

"Aleinikov used to be a member of the bureau, which means they'll understand." There was a note of bitter irony in his voice. "However, that's not the main point. When Polipov was First Secretary of the district Aleinikov was a member of the bureau. However, it's not a question of whether to appoint him to the bureau or not. What's important is that this'll give him a chance to get his bearings again. He'd become the Yasha Aleinikov he used to be. You don't know what he used to be like before, but I do. That's why I've been trying to find some way to help him. If we don't, he'll be a broken man. He'll never find a way out himself."

Kruzhilin was musing over something. Then he continued, although there seemed to be no connection with what he had just said. "Actually, every person spends his

life trying to understand himself. I remember Vasily Zasukhin used to talk about that a lot. Do you know where he is now, or whether he's alive? "

"No."

"Before, his kind of philosophy seemed primitive to me. I'm only just beginning to understand how deep it really is. That's it: a person keeps trying to understand himself, but it's a difficult job, and sometimes it can't be done without outside help. What're you looking at me like that for? Don't you agree? "

"I do. Completely."

"You asked me whether I still bear a grudge against Aleinikov. To tell you the truth, I did in the beginning. When I returned to my job in the district I set one condition and that was to have Aleinikov removed from the bureau. Now I realize it was a silly condition. I'd say I've also matured quite a bit in this past year."

"Not that much."

Kruzhilin glanced at him. In that moment he understood that this was Subbotin's reply to his request to be relieved from his office so that he might volunteer.

* * *

Kruzhilin spent another week in Novosibirsk, trying unsuccessfully to wrest another shipment of logs and lumber for the plant from the authorities. That night, feeling tired and irritable, he boarded a train for Shantara, stretched out on his hard upper berth and fell asleep. When he awoke the train was speeding across a bare plain. The low, dull, ponderous sun cast a pinkish-yellow light upon the earth. Snow-covered haystacks, weatherbeaten, sorry-looking little villages and dirty, sooty railroad barracks flashed by the windows as did the endless telegraph wires from which the night's snow fall had sifted down in places to make them appear knotted.

The railroad car was jam-packed. A red-headed, moustached old man with a large nose was puffing away at a smelly home-rolled cigarette on the lower berth. The acrid smoke rose and grated on Kruzhilin's throat. Sitting

opposite the old man was a fat, middle-aged woman with two double chins who was bundled up in a woolen shawl and several kerchiefs. She was holding a roll in one hand and a mug of boiling water in the other. She would bite into the roll and then slurp some of the hot liquid, chewing methodically and casting an anxious glance every now and then at the bundles, sacks, milk pails and baskets that surrounded her, as if she was counting them.

A girl of about eighteen or nineteen was huddled in a corner of the compartment. She seemed to have just gotten up from a sickbed: her dark eyes were sunken and feverish, her pretty round face was so drawn her cheekbones protruded from the tight, transparent skin. Her well-shaped lips were blue. She was dressed much too lightly for the season in a crumpled, spattered fall coat. She had a dirty Angora kerchief tied around her head and was wearing a good but scuffed pair of shoes. The girl seemed hungry, because her eyes kept darting towards the woman who was eating the roll. The girl would swallow hard, turn away to the window and push her slim hands up into the ragged sleeves of her coat, shivering as if she had chills. Every time there was a burst of laughter or a loud exclamation she would become frightened. The fat woman kept a wary eye on her, checking her bundles again, moving some of them closer to her feet. The big-nosed old man watched the woman, chuckled into his red beard and then said to no one in general.

"Back home in the village we had a woman named Glakha who used to make home-brew for sale. She was a great one for eating. No matter when you'd stop by to buy a bottle of her home-brew, you'd find her eating. She just kept on chewing all the time till she died from overeating. There was so much fat around her heart it stopped beating."

The fat woman stared at him stupidly and blinked. "You never thought of throwing away that stinky cigarette of yours, you old toad, did you?" she said in a deep voice.

"We were all sorry when Glakha died. She was a good woman and always gave us credit."

A group of elderly carpenters were sitting on their tool boxes and on the floor in the passage. They were apparent-

ly a team of itinerant workers. Farther along the aisle were old men, old women, younger women and children. There was not a single young man in sight. Voices were heard speaking over the clatter of the wheels:

"A lot of human bones will be ground up there."

"War's no picnic. Everybody knows that."

"And then, as soon as she got that death notice, she like turned to stone. She didn't say nothing, but her milk was gone. And the twins kept screaming their heads off, but she hadn't got a drop of milk for them."

"They said over the radio that the Germans are getting a good licking near Moscow."

"Russia's got a lot of enemies, but then Germans' are the worst by far, ever since when."

Kruzhilin climbed down from the upper berth and took a towel from his briefcase. "Keep an eye on it, will you? I'll go wash up," he said to the old man.

"All right," the man replied indifferently.

"Why don't you put your things up there now?" Kruzhilin said to the fat woman. As he made his way down the crowded aisle to the lavatory he heard her say,

"See that dandy, taking up a whole berth! Other men are off fighting at the front, but look at him, travelling around with his satchel. Hm! So now my things are in his way."

"You're a stupid woman," the old man said. "Fat people are always stupid."

"But I say he's good-for-nothing. He'll sit it out in the rear, and he'll get fatter than me, while our men are getting themselves killed up at front for nothing. My husband and my son-in-law were both called up."

As Kruzhilin splashed the cold, stagnant water on his face, he kept hearing what the woman had said over and over again. Her words wounded him, quite as if something with sharp, jagged edges were turning over in his heart.

"So you say I haven't matured that much?" he had asked Subbotin when they had parted the evening before.

"If you were dumb I'd try to explain and tell you things at the front depend on how well we're doing our job

here, and so on, and so forth. But," and he now spoke harshly, "do you want me to put Polipov back in charge of the district? "

"Still and all, Ivan Mikhailovich, maybe not now, not right now," Kruzhilin pleaded. "If someone's found to take my place. Maybe a disabled veteran? I'm still an able-bodied man, you know."

"Go on. Go on! " Subbotin said and took hold of Kruzhilin's shoulders, turning him towards the door.

The lavatory was dirty. Outbuildings flashed by the murky glass of the narrow window, and the wheels clattered over the switches.

Kruzhilin wiped his hands on his turkish towel and hurried out, but was too late, for the narrow passage was jam-packed with passengers and their baggage, waiting for the train to stop.

"Where the hell do you think you're going? " one of the old carpenters shouted. He was clutching his toolbox. The end of a small saw protruded from it. "Can't you see we're getting off here! "

"Go on back inside, dearie, and let us out."

Kruzhilin backed away into the lavatory again. There was a great screeching of brakes. The moment the train stopped shouting and cursing could be heard from the platform outside.

"Stop shoving! You're like a herd of wild animals! " the elderly woman conductor shouted. "Let the passengers get off! We won't be leaving for some time. You'll have plenty of time to board. Wait outside."

"Help! You're crushing me to death! " a woman shrilled.

The noise and pounding of feet gradually died down, and Kruzhilin came out of his enclosure. The passage was practically empty now, as was his compartment, although the old man and the girl were still there. The old man kept puffing on his cigarette, while the girl gazed sadly out the window.

"I see the lady with the bundles got off here," Kruzhilin said.

"I'd say she tumbled out. There she is," the old man said, nodding at the window.

Their car had stopped across from a row of market stalls. The woman with the triple chin was setting her bundles, baskets and milk pails on the counter, turning this way and that, opening and closing her mouth, and shaking her head. She was apparently arguing with the other market women, although they could not hear her voice.

"It's true when they say war brings grief to some and luck to others," the old man said sarcastically.

For some reason or other Kruzhilin felt he had him in mind rather than the fat woman. He frowned, put away his towel and clicked shut the hasps of his briefcase.

"This station's always been a good place for profiteers. That's for sure," the old man continued. "The trains always have long stopovers here. Look at her! What do you know! "

The fat woman had pulled a huge cast-iron pot from her basket. It was swathed in rags, and when she opened the lid steam poured out of the pot. She was immediately surrounded by a jostling crowd. The woman would take their money, tuck it into her bodice, and then fill the little paper cones which she had made up ahead of time with whatever it was she had in the pot.

"She's selling meat and potatoes," the old man said. "I guessed as much the minute she came in, 'cause the place was full of the smell of meat and potatoes."

The girl was staring at the fat woman through the window, and her eyes were hungry and feverish.

"You look like an intelligent man," the old man said, rubbing his bony knee with a flabby hand. "You look like some kind of official to me. Now you tell me this: do you think we've set the Germans on the lam for real? "

"Yes. I'm sure of it."

"You don't say? Do you think we're strong enough to keep them running? "

"Absolutely."

"Well. We'll see. Now you tell us ignorant people this: why'd this here war begin? "

Kruzhilin looked at the old man keenly. He shrugged and said, "They wanted to get rich at our expense, by

grabbing what we had. And they didn't like our system."

"You mean socialism?"

"Yes."

"Sure, we have socialism and they have capitalism," the old man agreed, rolling himself another cigarette. "But that's not it. What do they care about a system? They've gone and trampled all over Poland and France, and all the rest of those other countries, and all of them had capitalism for a system. But what you said about grabbing riches that aren't theirs, you've hit the nail on the head there. Man's greedy by nature. Just look at her," he nodded towards the fat woman again. She had sold the contents of the first pot and had pulled a second out of another basket. The woman was still surrounded by an eager crowd.

The woman conductor was coming down the passage, carrying a pail of water into which she dipped a small broom and sprinkled the floor. The impatient passengers milling around outside the locked car were banging on the door, demanding to be let in.

"There used to be a kulak named Smerdin in our village," the old man continued. "He was an old wreck to look at him. His skin hung in flaps and it was as blue as a naked fledgling's. I can't begin to tell you how greedy he was. He had a keen nose for a good deal. Whenever he'd sniff anything out he'd tremble like he had the chills. He skinned the village alive, had everybody in the vicinity in his debt, so that nobody dared stand up to him. He was a mean old dog. He lorded it over everybody. Then he found himself a new kind of pastime: he'd make the young girls wash him in the bathhouse. And this craziness of his was like a gift to the people, 'cause if a family was in debt and there was a young girl in that family, she'd go and wash him in the bathhouse, and he'd strike off some of the debt. That's the kind of old lecher he was. God must take a hand in things, though. The old dog didn't ruin the girls. Maybe he was afraid to, or maybe he was just too old and couldn't. I think that that Hitler of theirs is just like our Smerdin," he concluded unexpectedly.

Kruzhilin smiled.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Sure, I do. We had a Smerdin just like him, and he passed the time just about the same way, except that his name was Kaftanov."

"That's it," the old man nodded. "I haven't had much learning, so I can't put it into fancy words. The earth's a big place, with all sorts of countries and all sorts of people on it. But if you really get to thinking, you'll see it's just one big village. And that Hitler is just like our Smerdin, except that his hands are longer and his mouth is bigger."

After a silence the old man said, "I'm on my way to Pankrushikha Village. My son used to live there before the war. He died a hero, like it says in the death notice. But maybe they just wrote that to comfort us." There was a metallic ring in his voice, and his eyes glittered angrily.

"Why d'you say that? They always write the truth."

"That's what you think." The flame died away in the old man's eyes. "All kinds of things happen. I was in the fighting in World War I, so I know. A soldier'll be running, bump into a bullet, hit the ground, and that's all the heroism there is to him. And there never was anything heroic about my boy. He was the shy, quiet kind, though he was a great one for working. And he was good at making babies: one a year. So that there's six of them left fatherless now."

"You're right. There are many ways to die in a war. My son was lost in action right at the beginning. I don't think I'll ever find out how he died, or where. No one will. But still, he died a hero's death. And your son, no matter how he died, died a hero's death, because our boys sacrificed their lives for their country. There'll be songs written about them after the war. About your son, and mine, and all of them."

The girl who was huddled in the corner of the compartment was listening to their conversation, raising her prickly eyes to Kruzhilin's face from time to time. Her parched lips trembled as if she were going to cry. The swish of the conductor's broom sweeping the passage filled in the spaces of their conversation.

"Songs, you say," the old man murmured. "I don't think those songs will return me my son, or the children their father. Or your son, or all the others. Will they? "

Kruzhilin did not know what to say. The old man sighed and continued, "That's the war that's done it. I've been thinking about life in general. We know how strong that Hitler is right now. He's got all of Europe crushed in his fist. But if you get down to the heart of it, what'll you find? You take our Smerdin. He sure was lord and master of a whole big region. He had us all in his fist. It seemed he was so firmly planted on top of us all that we'd never get him off our backs. And where is he now? He's gone for good. Just like Hitler and his cronies will be. You were right when you said we'll get the upper hand in the long run. Except we'll have to pay a bitter price for it, and a whole sea of blood."

The new passengers had finally been let aboard. People were running along the passage, filling it with noise and shouting.

"We like near froze to death out there! "

"It took me a week to get my ticket, but I've only got a day's travelling."

"Aksyuta! Where are you? For God's sake! Where are you? "

The car trembled from the stamping of so many feet. At the far end some people were arguing over a seat. Then a girl's laughter filled the air. And suddenly, drowning out all other sounds, an accordion, its bellows stiff from the cold, filled the car with music. And a girl began to sing.

*When my boyfriend kisses me
He says I'm so sweet and prim.*

"Life continues," a wounded soldier on crutches said and smiled.

*I want him to let me be.
He wants me to marry him.*

Kruzhilin listened to the song and recalled what the old man had just said about no songs being able to bring back their sons or his grandchildren's father.

Although the old man was silent, his words kept reverberating in Kruzhilin's mind.

*All spring long I went to him,
Weaking out the grassy path....*

a high-spirited girl with a shrill voice confided to all the other passengers. She laughed infectiously at the end of each ditty. Kruzhilin visualized her, as small and sharp-eyed as the girl huddling in the corner probably, hurrying off to meet her boyfriend. "That's right. Life continues and always will, as it should, and no evil, losses or rivers of blood will ever stop it or snuff it out," he was thinking.

He had been glancing at the girl in the corner for quite some time. He knew that she was hungry and had probably been badly frightened. When the new passengers began streaming in she tried to make herself smaller still, greeting each new face tremulously and inching her thin hands farther up into the sleeves of her light coat.

"Do you still have a long way to go, child?" he asked.

At first, she did not realize he was addressing her. When she did, her dark eyes flashed angrily before she turned away to the window without uttering a sound.

"I tried to get a word out of her before, but she won't talk," the old man said. "She just gives you a scalding look, but doesn't say a word. Who knows? Maybe she's a mute."

The girl ignored this.

Kruzhilin went out to the platform and bought a bottle of boiled milk from the fat woman. He returned to the compartment and took half a loaf of bread and a can of meat from his briefcase, setting everything on the small table. Then he asked his companions whether anyone had a cup or a glass. The old man bent down and pulled a small, home-made wooden suitcase from under the seat. From it he took a tin cup, a chunk of fatback and several eggs.

"I'll join you," he said, moving closer to the table and pressing the girl farther into the corner.

Kruzhilin sliced the bread with his pocket knife, opened the can of meat and unwrapped a paper cone of potatoes. Then he filled the cup with milk, set it before the girl and said, "Go on. Eat."

She looked frantic and tried to get up and leave, but the old man shouted,

"Sit down and eat! "

"Let me out! " she cried.

"Well! A least she's got a voice," the old man exclaimed and beamed. "Sit still and don't wriggle. There." He placed three eggs before her, picked up the cup and forced it into her hand. "Mind you don't spill it."

"Please have something," Kruzhilin coaxed. "I can see you haven't had anything to eat. Go on."

She swallowed a lump in her throat. Her eyes filmed over, and she hung her head. "Thank you."

The train lurched and then began to move smoothly off. The wheels clattered louder and faster.

The girl raised the cup to her lips carefully, as if she were afraid of getting scalded, although the milk was cold, and took a small sip. Then she gulped the rest of it down, and then only did she seem to come to her senses. She blushed.

"That's all right. Go on and eat," the old man said. He put a slice of bread covered with a thick slab of fatback into her hand as if she were a small child.

They were passing through pine groves. At times, on a curve, Kruzhilin would see the black locomotive through the window as it shook its long, shaggy mane and whistled long and loud, as if calling to someone as it sped onward, leaving shreds of black smoke on the trees along the way.

The girl was eating slowly now, taking tiny bites and not looking at her two companions. She had turned pink, either from the food or from embarrassment, and there were small drops of perspiration on her chiselled nose.

The old man was puffing away on yet another cigarette. Kruzhilin was eating very slowly, for he sensed that the girl was still hungry.

"Thank you," she finally whispered, and for the first time looked at Kruzhilin with the gentle gratitude of a child. She even attempted a grateful smile, but became suddenly confused as the blood rushed to her thin cheeks.

"What's your name?" Kruzhilin asked after a while.

"Natasha", she replied softly. "Natasha Mironova."

"And where are you going, Natasha?"

"No place."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just going!" The prickly sparks had reappeared in her eyes. "What's it to you? Let me out," she said and

slipped into the passage.

"She must have seen a lot of trouble," the old man ventured. "I got on at dawn. It was still dark then. When it started getting light I heard her crying, but when I asked her what was wrong she wouldn't answer. She just kept flashing those angry eyes at me. Maybe her father, or brother's been killed. Or maybe it was her husband, or the boy she was going to marry. All the women have the same kind of sorrow now."

"She's a tramp if I ever saw one," a plain-faced woman sitting in the passage by the doorway offered unexpectedly. "And you really spread a table for her. But men never had any brains. She's a tramp, and maybe worse. You can see she's been in and out of every jail."

Kruzhilin turned towards the woman. "And what, may I ask, makes you think so?"

"It's written all over her face. There's a lot of her kind floating around nowadays." The sober-faced woman compressed her lips reproachfully.

"You're way off the track, dearie," the old man said and shook his head.

The woman merely pressed her lips more tightly.

Ten minutes passed, then half an hour, but still the girl had not returned. Kruzhilin was disturbed. He kept glancing at the old man, who also seemed rather abashed. Every now and then he would run his hand over his moustache, as if pulling icicles off it.

Another half an hour went by, but still the girl had not returned. The train stopped at several small sidings on the way.

"That's strange," the old man finally said. "She probably got off someplace."

"She really was a strange girl," Kruzhilin said to himself. He pulled out a newspaper he had bought in Novosibirsk and settled back to read it.

The train rumbled on for several more hours before it finally reached Shantara. The old man got off at a crossing on the way, lamenting about the scarcity of any wagons that might be going to his village before dark. Then the plain-faced woman got off, carrying her bundle pressed closed to her body. A thin, stern-looking conductor who

resembled an emaciated goat came through the car, checking tickets and papers, and accompanied by two tall militiamen. Kruzhilin kept thinking about the girl named Natasha Mironova and would not accept the woman's judgment of her as a tramp.

He caught sight of the girl about an hour after the conductor had come through as she was being led down the passage by the two tall militiamen. She was walking along with her head bent low.

"Natasha Mironova?" Kruzhilin said, rising.

The girl started and stopped. Her eyes were cold and vacant, and her face was chalk-white.

"What's the matter? Do you know her?" one of the militiamen asked.

"No. She was travelling in this compartment." Then, remembering the brand "tramp", he asked, "Who is she?"

"She doesn't have a ticket or any identification. Why?"

"Never mind."

"Thank you. You were very kind," the girl said. And although her voice lacked all emotion, there was something sarcastic about the way she had said it, something mocking and even hateful.

"Who is she?"

"We'll find out."

"Yes, they certainly will," she conceded, smiled scornfully and continued on her way. Now, however, she held her head up proudly.

Kruzhilin looked after her until she was out of sight. "That's strange. Very strange," he kept thinking until he reached Shantara. He thought of her several times after that, but he was soon so immersed in the urgent affairs of the district that he forgot all about her.

* * *

The morning after Kruzhilin returned from his trip he phoned Aleinikov and said, "Will you come over, Yakov Nikolayevich?" There was a short pause. Aleinikov replied, "Right now?"

"If you can. I'm free right now."

Aleinikov came to his office about forty minutes later. He seemed faded and shrivelled, and as he said hello he glanced at Kruzhilin dourly and apprehensively from under his shaggy brows. Then he took a seat at the long conference table, placed his hands on it and interlaced his fingers. His thin lips were pulled down slightly at the corners, as if he was offended by the summons and did not expect anything good to come of their conversation.

"How's life, Yakov? "

The question struck both of them as being incongruous. Aleinikov looked at him in surprise, shrugged and clenched his hands.

"Subbotin and I had a long talk about you when I was at the Regional Committee."

"Indeed? " Aleinikov smiled sourly and lowered his head. The scar on his cheek was turning blue. "I suppose you were discussing my private affairs? " he said, glancing at the door and in the general direction of Vera's office.

"We spoke of that, too."

"And what if I love her? " Aleinikov muttered. His entire face and even his neck became suffused.

Kruzhilin gazed at him long and sadly.

"Actually, what is it to you whether I do or not? That's something neither you nor Subbotin can understand."

"I don't agree."

Aleinikov raised his head slowly. His eyes moved across the wall, across the large map of the Soviet Union that was studded with tiny paper flags, across the large blue-black safe that resembled a coffin and suddenly came up against Kruzhilin's. Their eyes locked, and in those few seconds Aleinikov realized that Kruzhilin knew of his relations with Vera and even of what he was going through.

"That's how life is," he said and lowered his head again.

It was snowing lightly. Aleinikov had walked to the District Committee slowly, looking out over the snow-covered roofs of the houses along the way, breathing in the cold, snow-fresh air. Now he again wished to be out on the street, or beyond the village, by the Gromotushka Bushes,

where he and Vera had often met. He wanted to be there, to watch the large snowflakes settling on the ground and on the trees.

He rose and went over to the window as he had once before, glancing out at the snow piled high around the green fence outside Kruzhilin's house.

"I see the fence is still there. I thought you wanted to take it down? "

"I did. But you were against it. You even forbade me to. Who was it who said it was put there for a purpose and should remain? "

"I did," Yakov admitted. "But what are words? "

It kept on snowing. It seemed to Aleinikov that the feathery snowflakes were slipping down the windowpane with a soft, sad, rustling sound. He listened attentively, but heard nothing.

"Do you take them back then? "

"You only returned to the district a year ago," Yakov said, as if he had not heard Kruzhilin's question, "but it seems like years have passed." He was silent as he watched the fluffy, moth-like snowflakes beating against the glass.

"Which means you've gotten mixed up, is that it? "

"If things are mixed up they can be unravelled. This is much worse. Much harder to understand." Aleinikov walked across the office, hunched over so that his back beneath the tight black cloth of his jacket looked as if he were carrying a heavy weight. "Yes, it's much worse. And much harder to understand. It's not something that can be put into words easily."

"Don't try, Yakov." It sounded like a request. "Some-day all the necessary words will come to you, I think. It's still impossible to get a clear picture of all that's happened. What we have to do now is carry on in the name of the cause for which you and I fought, Yasha. And carry on with as much fire and as closely-knit as we once were." He changed the subject without warning, although his voice was now stern. "I think we should elect you to membership in the District Committee Bureau. I'd like to know your opinion on this."

Aleinikov was not surprised at Kruzhilin's proposal. He looked at him keenly, sat down and interlaced his fingers

again. Then he spoke in a hollow voice, as if speaking through a tube, "I don't want to be elected."

"Why not? "

"I've volunteered for active service. I think I've finally settled the matter with my chief. He's looking around for someone to replace me." He smiled wryly, and when the smile faded added morosely, "Actually, they're happy to let me go. If he hadn't agreed, I'd have run away like Iniutin did. There's no other way out for me. Does this sound funny to you? "

Kruzhilin rose. Aleinikov expected an angry retort. However, he was surprised when Polikarp Matveyevich replied calmly, although sarcastically,

"In a way, yes. Not that you're so anxious to see active service, but something else. You're searching for death, if I've understood you correctly."

The blood rushed to Aleinikov's head. He felt as if someone had struck him between the eyes. "I don't know. Probably." He winced. "I can't do it myself. I probably lack the will-power to. But there...."

"You idiot! "

Aleinikov jumped to his feet and rasped, "That's what Zasukhin said three years ago."

"What did he say? "

Aleinikov did not bother to explain. He jammed his hands into his pockets, lurched and headed towards the door, but stopped for a moment, as if he had remembered something. "I know I'm a fool, but there's nothing I can do about it. You don't know half of my past. But thanks for recommending me, Polikarp. And for understanding that I really was, am, in love with Vera. I know I've hurt her, but there's nothing I can do about that, either. And I couldn't explain it sensibly, either." He stood there for a few more moments, thinking something over, and then left, shutting the door softly behind him.

* * *

The blue of twilight was gradually becoming denser. Andrei sat by the window, looking at the darkening

snowdrifts that rose like waves in the garden, at the snow-covered wattle fence between their yard and the Kashkarovs' house. He felt depressed, but did not know why. He wanted to do something so unusual it would make people gasp and admire him, but no definite idea occurred to him, and he knew there was nothing of the kind to be done in Shantara, ever.

After his aborted attempt to run off to war Andrei had returned to school as a prisoner to the rack. He was positive his classmates would jeer at him, and was surprised when they welcomed him, especially the girls, with awe and followed him around in a crowd during recess as a returned hero. But what if he would have actually reached the front lines and done something bold and daring? What if, after the war ended, he would return to school in uniform and decorated? As his thoughts dwelled on this his heart felt faint from bliss. True, he had no clear idea of the daring feats which he might have accomplished, but still, it was so pleasant to think of the possibility.

However, a week passed, and then another, and his friends' interest in him and in his journey began to wane, and then ceased. This offended him, but he knew in his heart of hearts that some day he would amaze the school, all of his neighbors, and all of Shantara. "Just you wait. Wait till the winter's over."

Of all his friends, Vitya Kashkarov alone never lost interest in his flight and often discussed the moustached conductor, the girl who had given him a drink by the well, and many other details of his journey. He would invariably conclude, "You can't trust people. Nohow."

Andrei was of the same opinion, and although he did not especially like Vitya and was wary of him, because his brother had a bad reputation in Shantara as a thief and Vitya himself had been mixed up in the mobile shop business that fall, he was glad that in this Vitya and he were of the same opinion.

Still and all, and although he was wary of Vitya and did not especially like him, Andrei felt sorry for him. The kids at school avoided Vitya and called him a thief. They often picked on him. At first, Vitya had accepted his beatings in silence, never defending himself or tattling, but

then he began to fight back. That winter, when some of the boys had forced him into a corner in the school yard, he had snatched a hammer head from his pocket and, wielding it like brass knuckles, had bloodied several heads. The boys had scattered, caught unawares by the sudden assault.

Vitya had nearly been expelled from school at the time. The boys had stopped pestering him after that. Then someone started a rumor to the effect that Vitya carried a knife which his brother Makar had given him. The boys believed it, and if Vitya approached a group and stuck his hands in his pockets, they would quickly disperse. Andrei knew he had no knife.

"You've scared them all silly," he said.

"So what? They're a bunch of stupid fools."

Vitya was a good student, but his good grades did not make him happy. After the mobile shop case ended he became completely introverted, spending each recess off in a corner by himself or wandering around in the school yard, hands in his pockets and eyes on the ground.

One day, after Vitya had been questioning Andrei about his journey for the tenth time, he said, "You and me were both in the militia. How come you've never asked me about the mobile shop?"

"Tell me."

Vitya looked at him intently and then sobbed.

Andrei was at a loss. "What's the matter?"

"Makar made me. That louse. You know what he said? He said, 'Go over to the watchman and tell him something's scratching inside the truck. And we'll conk him on the head.' That's what he said."

"You should've warned the watchman."

"Oh, yeh? And then what? You don't know Makar." He smeared the tears across his cheek and walked off sideways, as if he were making his way through some barrier.

During the last recess that day he had come over to Andrei and said, "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"It's not as easy as all that. Let's go skiing on the hills

this evening. We can talk it over then."

"All right." Andrei was intrigued.

"I forgot, I have to do the wash today. Ma's been sick for two weeks. But I can leave half of it for tomorrow. As soon as it starts getting dark you look out the window and watch for me. And then come right out."

Now Andrei sat by the window, staring across the fence at the Kashkarovs' garden, waiting for Vitya.

He came out of his house when the first pale star appeared in the sky over their chimney, as if it were a spark that had flown out of the chimney and would now go out. But it did not. Instead, it became brighter and brighter.

Vitya dropped his peeling old skis on the snow, glanced at the windows of Andrei's house and waved. He seemed certain Andrei was waiting for his signal. Andrei went over to the coat rack and pulled on his jacket.

Then the outside door opened. His father came in in a cloud of steam that rushed into the room, slipped along the smooth floorboards and under the kitchen table, as if sniffing at something, and melted away. His father took off his quilted jacket, which smelled of machine oil and kicked off his old felt boots that were also spotted with oil. He sat down on the bench by the door. "Who's home?"

"Nobody, except the old man." Andrei nodded towards the closed door.

"Where's your mother? "

"Milking the cow."

"Where are you going?"

Fyodor always looked solemn. He seemed constantly irked by something. Of late, he had become still more dour, never speaking to anyone except for a few short questions which sounded more like short barks than spoken words. He seemed always to be lost in thought. Sometimes a mean little smile would touch his prickly black moustache. He could sit still for hours on end, staring at some spot unblinkingly, always mulling over something.

"Uh, I'm just going outside," Andrei replied.

However, his father seemed to have forgotten all about him.

Something was going on in their family. Andrei was positive of it. Of late, his mother seemed to have become shrivelled and sallow-faced. Her eyes were sunken and lifeless. He had also noticed that she often wept, although she tried to keep them from noticing.

"Why does Ma cry all the time?" he once asked Semyon. "Pa never talks to us, and she keeps on crying."

"Why don't you try running away more often?"

Andrei knew this was not the real reason, for his mother had long since got over that. It was something else, something grown-up and serious which he was as yet unable to comprehend.

"I know Pa's mad because of all those refugees living here with us," Andrei ventured. "But where can they go if the Germans burned down their village? Doesn't Pa understand?"

"My! you're a regular philosopher, aren't you? It's none of your business. Understand? And anyway...."

"Anyway what?"

"You'll get bald from too much thinking."

Andrei was hurt by Semyon's attitude, but it only served to strengthen his conviction that there was something wrong about the relationship between his parents.

Andrei caught up with Vitya outside the village, for Vitya was skiing quickly, shoving off with his poles and bending sharply.

The three or four highest hills were right outside the village. The sound of children shouting and laughing came from there. Vitya circled around the hills and headed towards the black strip of the Gromotushka Bushes. High sheets of gray, seemingly-poisonous fog rose above the bushes. The dark sky in the east seemed to be advancing on them from the crags of Zvenigora, filling in the space between the mountain and Shantara, inundating the edge of the village, while in the west they could still see pale, shimmering shreds of cloud. Andrei felt that the sun, which had rolled beyond the horizon, would suddenly change its mind, rise again and drive off the darkness, as the wind drives dust along the streets.

Vitya kept on for quite some time before stopping to say, "Are you knocked out?"

"Uh-huh." Andrei gulped the cold air in eager mouthfuls. "Look how far we've come! "

"You call this far? It's only about four kilometers from home. I stopped because I feel sorry for you. I ski twice as far as this every evening."

"What for? "

"I'm in training. It'll come in handy."

The sun was not going to rise again. The shreds of cloud were fading against the sunset, barely visible now, so that the sky seemed spattered with faint, gleaming spots. A dark winter night was quickly descending upon the earth.

"Do you come out here by yourself? "

"Sure. Who's there to ski with? "

"Aren't you scared? The wolves are running in packs now. You know that."

Vitya spat, as if to say that he had no intention of answering such stupid questions.

They stood in silence for a while, watching the stars come out.

"I'm cold," Andrei said. "What was it you wanted to tell me? "

Vitya poked the frozen snow with his pole. "When are you going to run away to the war again? "

"What? What're you talking about? Never."

"Quit lying. I know you are."

"You're a dope! How do you know? "

"I just do."

"You're a dope! You don't even know what you're talking about." Andrei shoved off and headed back to the village.

Vitya caught up with him and blocked his way. "Wait. I knew you'd say no if we were back home, or that you'd run away from me. But I won't let you run away here until you tell me."

Andrei wanted to detour around him, but Vitya blocked his way again.

"What do you want to do, fight? "

"No. I don't like to fight. You know why I'm asking? I want to go with you. Will you take me? "

"What? "

"If you don't, I'll go by myself."

"Go on. But I'm not going again." Andrei side-stepped and started out. Vitya skied along behind him for about a while and then finally called out plaintively.

"Andrei! "

Andrei stopped, as if having taken pity of him.

"I'm going to go anyway," Vitya said softly, avoiding Andrei's eyes. "I'll go to where the fighting is, because I can't stay here any more. I just thought it'd be easier if we went together. We'd make it together. I'm sorry you don't trust me. I'm no blabbermouth like Kolya Iniutin or your brother Semyon. You know how they questioned me at the militia? They wanted to know where Makar had all the stuff stashed away. I know where it is, but I didn't blab."

"Where is it? "

"I'll tell you, if you tell me you're getting ready to go again. And if you take me. All right? "

"We'll see."

Vitya hesitated. "All right. I trust you. There's a dame with big tits who lives at the edge of the village. Her name's Manya Ogorodnikova. You don't know her. Makar and Lenny Gvozdev hid all the stuff at her place that night and then drove the truck off and left it someplace. Maybe her attic's still full of shoes and boots, and stuff. There. I knew it, but I didn't tell."

"That's 'cause you were scared of Makar."

"No, maybe it was 'cause of Makar a little bit, but mainly 'cause they trusted me. Even though they're thieves. But they took me in on it, and that means I've got to keep mum. If I wouldn't have known about it, it'd be different. But I did. That's where I'm to blame. I'd like to see you stand up to Makar! You know how hard he beat me?" Vitya sniffled again.

Andrei frowned as he listened to him. The faintest of wrinkles appeared on his furrowed brow. "You mean you want to run away from Makar? "

"Yes! That's why! " Vitya gesticulated excitedly, making his ski pole slice the air. "Now you know. 'Cause as soon as he gets out of jail, he'll be after me to help him again."

Shantara seemed bowed down beneath its snow-laden

roofs. It's lights twinkled dimly in the distance, while the sky above it was black, save for a spot over the plant which had a dull red glow. It seemed that the slightest breeze would snuff out the redness and the faint, forlorn, twinkling lights.

"I'm done for if I don't run away, Andrei," Vitya said in a barely audible voice.

Andrei guessed he was holding back his tears and decided it really would be the end of Vitya.

"What if you tell them where all that stuff is? "

"How can I? I gave him my word." Vitya sounded frightened.

"Who'd you give it to? Just think of that."

"It doesn't matter. Can't you understand? It doesn't matter who. The important thing is that I promised not to. Can't you understand that? "

Andrei looked at him in wonder. He thought it was fine to place so much importance on a promise, yet something inside him was protesting angrily. "If that's it, you could give anybody your word," he said after some thought. "You don't know what can happen when you're in the army. What if the nazis capture you? What if you get scared of them like you are of Makar, and...."

The snow crunched beneath Vitya's skis. He swayed, and Andrei thought he was going to hit him with his pole, to knock him over and beat him up. But Vitya did not hit him. He shifted his weight again and said, with a pause between the words, as if he were choking,

"Oh ... you...." and he skied off into the darkness, a small, pitiful, helpless figure.

"Vitya! Hey! " Andrei realized that he had hurt his friend terribly and skied after him, begging him to stop, but this only made Vitya increase his speed. Finally, Andrei mustered what strength he had, caught up with him, grabbed his hand and made him stop.

"Get out of my way! " Vitya yanked his hand away.

A sliver of moon floated out from behind Zvenigora and sailed across the sky, very near the earth. It did not become any brighter, although the rooftops of Shantara took on a bluish tint, while the tops of the hills on which the village children had just been skiing sparkled icily.

The same sparks, perhaps somewhat larger, were glistening on Vitya's lashes.

"I know you're good, Vitya," Andrei said shamefacedly. "All right. But how'll we reach the front lines now? We'll never make it. Not in winter. We'll have to wait till summer. Understand?"

"I'm not that dumb."

"We'll make our plans as soon as it's spring."

"Will you take me then?"

"I said we'd talk it over. But see you don't breathe a word of it to anybody."

"The radio announcer said the Germans are on the run now."

"Never mind. Semyon says the war'll last for a long time," Andrei consoled him. "And I looked it all up on the map. They've still got a lot of our land. It'll take a long time to chase them out again."

The waning moon was climbing higher, slipping through the cold, dark void, gazing down upon the earth sadly.

"You know, that damn Makar isn't even my brother," Vitya said unexpectedly. "Ma always said he was, but he isn't. Makar and Lenny Gvozdev were drinking in our kitchen and talking, and I was up on the ledge on the oven, so I heard everything they said. You know who he is? He's your uncle."

"Quit fooling. I only have two uncles: my Uncle Ivan, who lives in Mikhailovka and my Uncle Anton, who's the director of the plant."

"I'm not fooling," Vitya was taking his revenge. "Makar's your Ma's brother."

"Ha, ha!" It was a nervous laugh, though. "Tell me another! I'd have known if...."

"If Makar was lying to Lenny, then I'm lying, too." Vitya skied around Andrei and started off quickly towards the twinkling lights of the village, leaving Andrei to stare dumbfoundedly after him as he was swallowed up by the dark. At that moment Andrei felt he, and not Vitya, was melting away, disappearing in the dark, becoming a part of the black fog of night, becoming nothing.

* * *

Fyodor sat on the bench near the door. He had not noticed Andrei leaving or Anna entering and was brought up with a start by the smell of fresh, warm milk.

The house was still deserted, if not for the old man coughing now and then in the next room, but Fyodor knew that Maria Firsova and Semyon would be returning from work soon and that Ganka and Dima would be back from school, making the house crowded, noisy and alien, just like a railroad station.

"You're early today. I haven't started supper yet," Anna said, pouring the milk from the pail into pitchers.

Fyodor did not care one way or another. He was thinking about Anfisa. That fall he had told Anna outright that he would either move in with her or else would never go to her place again, but he still did not know what to do. He felt empty inside, although he did not recall when this emptiness had taken hold of him. He was glad it had, for now felt indifferent about everything and everyone: his brothers Anton and Ivan, Anna and Anfisa, his children, his job, and the fact that his home had become a lodging house. "To hell with them. They can think whatever they want to of me," he would say to himself as he sometimes recalled the evening he had spent at Anton's house. "I'll live any way I damn please."

However, the funny part of it was that he did not know what way that was now.

After his first and only visit to Anton's house he had not seen either him, Ivan, or Kruzhilin. He would glimpse Anfisa through the window sometimes, and if he bumped into her on the street he would greet her, but the sound of his voice would make her jump. She would look around anxiously and hurry off.

Still and all, he somehow knew that this feeling of emptiness and this calm were temporary. This would all soon end, and then he would seek out Anfisa again. If he decided to move in with her for good she would accept him. He was positive of this. But what would that entail? Where would they live? He wouldn't be able to live next door to his own house. He didn't give a damn about Anna

and Semyon, but he already felt guilty when he thought of his younger sons Dima and Andrei. He would be seeing them every day on the street. Besides, Anfisa's children were big now. Kolya was still a gangling boy, but Vera was a full-blown woman. She and Semyon had even been planning on getting married, although it had finally been called off. But what if they made up and she married Semyon? With him married to her mother? It would mean his son was married to his step-daughter! He'd never live it down.

There was a lot he would have to think about, but he wanted to put it off for the time being. Besides, there was no urgent need for him to make any decisions as yet, and he continued living there, a stranger in his own home, completely absorbed in himself. Anna was pottering at the stove. Fyodor stared at his wife, bent over a pot, at the pale yellow reflection of the flames on her moist face and suddenly noted to himself, as he often had before, quite calmly and indifferently, "She's a good-looking woman." He rose and went out.

He had nothing in mind when he did, so he just stood there in the snow-covered yard, watching the light fade in the west. He wondered whether he should clean the cowshed and turned in that direction, fingering a box of matches in his pocket to light the lantern. However, as he had that fall, he again saw a shadow in the window of the Iniutin's house and stopped.

A moment later he bent his head to enter the low doorway. Anfisa was standing stiffly by the stove, staring at him as threateningly as a snake about to strike. Vera had on an old housedress. She stuck her dishevelled head out of her room and stared at her mother, not Fyodor. A scornful smile touched her lips.

"Want me to leave? "

"Yes. Leave the room for a minute," her mother said, never taking her eyes off Fyodor.

Vera made a disdainful face, pulled on her sheepskin coat and took her old shawl off the peg. "Hurry up and finish, because it's freezing outside and Kolya'll be back from school soon," she said and sneered at Fyodor.

He picked up a stool, placed it against the wall by the

door and sat down.

"Why'd you come?" Anfisa inquired coldly.

"I don't know." Indeed, he did not know. "I feel like there's a rock on my heart."

She did not reply, nor had she moved from where she stood by the stove.

"I've been thinking, Anfisa. I'm going to leave Anna."

Anfisa seemed as taut as a bowstring as she waited for him to continue. The kitchen was smelled of sour dough that had been set out to rise.

He suddenly wished she would fall to her knees beside him, look up into his eyes as devotedly as she always had and tell him how she loved him. Then she'd press her tear-stained face against his chest and sob like a girl. Her shoulders would heave, and he would sigh indifferently, and then would finally deign to stroke her head and back. And so, in order to bring all this about, he said, "But I don't know where to go. I guess you won't take me in, will you?"

"You'll find yourself a place. There's lots of widows in the village now."

The silence was so heavy he felt it was ringing, becoming ever louder, and so unbearable it seemed it would burst and shatter in rainbow splashes, like a sheet of plate glass upon which a stone has been dropped from a great height. But the silence did not burst. It kept on ringing.

"What do you mean?" A crooked, silly smile touched his lips. "What about you?"

"I'm not a widow yet. Kirian writes that he's doing his bit out there."

"He-he!" His chuckle bubbled twice in the stillness, frightening him. "What're you trying to say?"

"I'm waiting for him to come back home, Fyodor. So don't you come here any more."

That was all she said. Her words were like large bumble bees buzzing inside his head. For some time he could not understand the meaning of what she had said, but when he finally did a hot wave rose up within him, crashed against his chest so that he felt his lungs would burst. His head swam. He swayed and rose, feeling that his legs had turned to jelly.

"What're you saying?" He mopped his damp brow with his fur hat. "Don't you love me any more?" he asked, finding the necessary words at last.

"I said I have a husband."

"Well. That's a nice how d'you do! "

"Go back home, Fyodor. Vera'll get frozen outside."

Fyodor stumbled out onto the porch. Vera was standing by the outside door, hugging the sheepskin coat around her.

"That didn't take long!" she sneered and turned to enter the house.

Stung to the quick, he grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "You ... you!" he seethed. "What d'you understand? What can you understand?"

Her shawl slipped back from her head. She held him off, shoving her fists against his chest, glaring up at him to shout in turn, "What d'you want? What d'you want?"

Her face was very close, but he could not make out her features clearly in the gloom. For a moment, however, he imagined it was Anfisa. He felt the same sharp shoulders through her coat, it was the same throaty, sensuous voice and the same glittering eyes. He was frightened by this and pushed her away.

"You're a bear. A real bear!" she muttered, pulled on her shawl and fixed her hair. "What's there to understand about you and Ma? I've understood all about you ages ago."

"You're a stupid fool."

"Maybe I am, but I'll grow out of it when I get older, maybe." Her teeth gleamed in the dim light. Vera entered the pantry and slammed the door shut.

Fyodor ambled across the yard, recalling that Anfisa had stood stiffly by the oven as they had talked. She had shown him the door now, once and for all, and for a moment it had stunned and crushed him but, strangely, all this seemed to have evaporated, leaving him in a state of mild surprise. He felt that it was nothing more than a dream, that none of this had really happened, including his encounter with Vera.

A bridle clinked. Fyodor raised his head to see a horse and sleigh outside his house. He wondered who had come calling.

Entering the house, he saw his brother Ivan sitting on the bench by the door. "Ha! He's sitting on my bench," Fyodor noted with malicious satisfaction.

Ivan had on a black high-necked shirt under his jacket which was too big for his scrawny neck. He had hung his fur hat on his knee. Anna was setting the table. Fyodor could hear Dima and Semyon talking in their room, and Maria Firsova and her daughter Ganka behind the closed door of their room.

Ivan had folded his worn cloth coat and long sheepskin coat on the bench. Fyodor's first thought was to go over to him, grab him by the scruff of his neck with one hand, push open the door with the other, throw him out into the pantry and then throw his things out after him. Then he would lock the door. He would do all this without uttering a single word. However, he did not, because Anna had stopped setting the table and stood watching his every movement warily as he took off his hat and jacket. Then Semyon appeared from the other room. He looked at his father keenly, went over to Ivan, lifted his hat from his knee and hung it on a peg.

"Where's Andrei?" Anna asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, she began slicing a loaf of bread.

Still and all, Fyodor might have carried out his plan if not for Semyon and the voices in the next room, where the refugee family lived. "I see I've got a very strange visitor," he muttered. "How'd you dare come here?"

"What are you, a wild animal to have people scared of you?" Semyon said.

"Nobody asked you. You keep your mouth shut!"

"Well, I'll be going," Ivan said, rising.

"Sit down!" Semyon placed his hand on his shoulder.

"We're going to have tea now, Uncle Ivan."

"Why don't you stay over? It's not right for you to be going back at night. Look how cold it is." It was Anna speaking.

Fyodor listened to his wife's voice and could not believe she had dared to invite Ivan to stay over in his presence. What was going on? First Anfisa, and now Anna. What change had come over her to make her so bold? It was as if he, her husband, were not the master of this

house and her lord and master, too. And there was Semyon, acting as if he had a right to speak up!

This so stunned and frightened Fyodor that he sat down on a chair behind the bed. He scowled as he ran his hand over the wooden headboard, shifting his eyes from his wife to his son, to his brother.

"No, I can't do that," Ivan was saying, shaking his blond head. "I stopped off at Anton's house before coming here, and he and Liza wanted me to stay over, too. I have to hurry back with the medicine for Pankrat. He's real bad. He was burning up all last night."

"Why didn't you take him to the hospital?" Anna asked.

"He doesn't want to go. He said he'll get over it. Kruzhilin came to see him yesterday and said he'd take him to the hospital in his car, but he wouldn't go."

Fyodor had heard someone say that Pankrat Nazarov, the chairman of the Red Wheat Farm, had caught cold on his way back from the regional center and was bedridden. Then, pouring all his venom and irritation onto the innocent Nazarov, Fyodor said, "No hospital can cure a man with TB."

Ivan looked at his brother and sighed. "We're afraid he won't live through the spring. Spring's the worst part of the year for anybody with bad lungs."

"Who's we?"

"Everybody at the farm."

As Fyodor asked his questions he kept searching anxiously for the reason behind the sudden change that had come over Anna and that had made her so bold. He was also surprised to hear himself actually talking to his brother. A few minutes later he ceased understanding himself altogether, for when Anna said that supper was ready, he rose and took a seat opposite Ivan.

They ate in silence. Anna did not join them, but kept filling their cups with tea: her husband's, Semyon's, Dima's and Ivan's. She was most attentive to Ivan. No sooner would he finish one cup, than she would fill it. Fyodor sneered as he watched her.

Dima was the first to finish. He rose and left the table,

and was soon followed by Semyon. Then Ivan pushed his cup away.

"Have another, Ivan," Anna said.

Fyodor sneered again, but this time he said, "Look at her trying to please you! You can see how happy she is to see you."

Ivan raised his heavy lids. "You'll soon be fifty, but you've never learned any sense."

Fyodor leaned back in his chair slowly. His eyes, set deep beneath his shaggy brows, were full of hatred. The large fingers of his right hand that lay on the table began to tremble. He drew his hand in, rubbed his palm against the sharp corner of the table and suddenly curled it into a fist, grabbing a handful of the soft linen tablecloth in the process. It seemed as if he would now yank it off the table, sending the cups and plates crashing to the floor. Anna turned pale.

"Why, you!" Fyodor was short of breath. His large lower lip twitched. "They squashed you, but didn't do a good enough job."

"Too bad," Ivan said.

"You're right."

"Yep. But maybe you're the one they should have squashed."

They sat at opposite sides of the table, eyes locked in combat.

"Well, well," Fyodor drawled.

Anna stood beside Ivan. Her teeth were clenched as if to keep back the wild scream that was ready to escape.

"And what reason, may you say, would the Soviet Government have for squashing me?" Fyodor felt he could not control his words. They kept slipping away, and he kept snatching at them, setting them up clumsily into sentences, while trying to see what the end result would be and what meaning they produced. But he seemed unable to do this, and so the expression on his large face was one of helpless stupidity.

"I'd say that as far as Soviet power goes, you... I don't know how to put it...."

Fyodor was still clutching the corner of the tablecloth. At this, his fist jerked.

"Sure, you fought for the establishment of Soviet power. I know that. But you're not for it, Fyodor. At any rate, you're sorry it's the kind of government we have. You just can't accept it."

Ivan was also having difficulty in speaking.

Fyodor kept squinting and then opening his eyes wide. The meaning of his brother's words would suddenly be clear to him, and then vanish like water running through a sieve. He finally exhaled noisily, opened his fist and let go of the tablecloth. "That's a pretty fancy job of sticking a hair into a beard. When'd you think of it? While you were in jail?"

"No. When I got back. After that evening at Anton's. I kept thinking about what Kruzhilin said then, and it suddenly all added up. But as far as you're concerned, he only said half the truth. And the whole truth...."

Fyodor rose so quickly his chair bounced away. Ivan rose, too. Anna opened her mouth to scream, but at that moment, probably in response to the thumping chairs, Semyon appeared.

"What's up?" He took them all in.

"Get out of here!" Fyodor barked. "And what's the whole truth?"

"You know that better than anybody," Ivan said. He went over to the bench and pulled on his coat. "I've just told you what I think about you, Fyodor."

Semyon was still there. He was leaning against the wall, watching his uncle. Fyodor crossed the kitchen with his head cocked, as if listening to something.

"And why aren't I for it?" he asked, stopping. He stood still, with his head still cocked, awaiting Ivan's reply.

"I guess you were born like that. I remember what you were like as a kid."

"And what was I like?"

"There were all sorts of little snags in your character. You were greedy and envious, and wilful, and, like Kruzhilin said when we were at Anton's: a rip in time becomes a hole."

"All right." Fyodor tugged at the end of his moustache, then ran his finger over it. He sat down on the edge of the bed and smiled to himself. "Let's say that's so. But

you try to make some sense out of this: how come I'm not for it, how come I'm against it if I was a partisan and fought for it, risking my life every day? Hm? Try to explain that away."

He kept saying "it", not naming names for some reason or other.

"There's a lot that's hard to explain in life," Ivan said, pulling on his long sheepskin coat. "That's right, you were a partisan. But I have a feeling that if you had a choice now, you'd be fighting on the other side."

Anger shot through Fyodor's body. His head jerked, as did the hand that was resting on the headboard. Hatred streamed from his eyes as he slowly rose. At that moment Semyon strode over to Ivan, pulled his own jacket off the peg and said,

"I'll see you out, Uncle Ivan."

"I'll tell you something, Ivan," Fyodor was choking the words out of his hairy mouth, "Don't you ever dare come to my house again! Hear me? What business have you got with me? Why'd you come here?"

"You'd think you were the only one living here. I've no business with you. I came to see Anna."

"What for? I said what for?"

"She'll tell you if she wants to."

Ivan said goodbye to Anna, and he and Semyon went out. Fyodor sat down again. He was silent. He suddenly remembered Vera standing on the porch and looking at him as if she was going to push him down into the snow. He had called her a stupid fool, and she had replied that she might get over it in time. That was a very strange thing to have said.

"Why'd he come?"

"To tell me what Pankrat Nazarov's answer was."

"What answer?"

"I asked him whether they'd take me in as a member of the collective farm. Me and the boys."

"What?"

"You said you'd divorce me. What'll the boys and me do by ourselves? We can make out if we join the farm."

Fyodor stared at her with a silent smile. "And what

did Pankrat say? ”

“He said they’d be glad to have us.”

“You don’t say? And what if I changed my mind about getting divorced? ”

“I still have a head of my own, too,” she said after a pause. “I’ll leave you then.”

“Well! ” Fyodor rose. “Say that again! ”

Anna, who had been clearing the table, backed away into a corner. They were unable to say anything else, for at that moment there was a loud clattering of ski poles outside, the door opened and Andrei, rosy-cheeked from the cold, entered. Semyon followed him in.

“Here’s our skier,” Semyon said, wiping Andrei’s wet nose. “He’s been out till his nose started running.”

Anna sat Andrei down to have supper. He slurped the hot tea from his saucer and was anxious to ask his mother a question that had been bothering him, but each time he was about to speak a glance at his father, who sat there scowling darkly, made him hold his tongue.

“Go on, it’s time for bed,” his mother said as soon as he had eaten.

* * *

Andrei went into the room he shared with Dima and Semyon. Dima sat hunched over the desk, doing his homework. Semyon was lying on his bed, reading.

“Vitya just told me that Makar isn’t his brother. And he said he’s my uncle. How come? ” Andrei asked.

Semyon looked up. “If you listen hard enough, you can always pick up a pack of lies.”

Semyon seemed to have been unawares. Seeing how confused he looked, Andrei realized that Vitya had been telling the truth.

Dima lay down his pen and turned around. “That’s no lie. Makar is Ma’s own brother. I know.”

“What d’you know? Who told you that? ” Semyon shouted. “You don’t know what you’re talking about! ”

“What are you shouting for? ” Andrei asked.

Semyon looked at his wide-open eyes, turned on his

side clumsily and winced, as if he had a sour taste in his mouth. He punched his pillow angrily to fluff it up. "You're too young to understand. Turn off the light. Let's go to sleep."

An hour later all the other lights went out in the Savelyevs' house. It stood silent and weighted down by the heavy layer of snow on the roof, one of a long row of houses that were all alike in the dark. Andrei could not fall asleep for a long time. He lay beside his sleeping brother Dima and kept thinking about what Vitya had said. Finally, he drifted off. Fyodor and Anna were still awake.

Fyodor lay on his back, staring up at the dark ceiling, feeling the warmth of his wife's body beside him.

"So you've decided to leave me?" he finally asked in a mocking voice. "I was wondering what made you so bold. You were even going to have Ivan stay over."

"And I will leave you. I can't take it any more," she sobbed.

"You're just under the weather," he said wearily. "You're not going anywhere. And let's not say any more about it."

"But I will. I will leave you!" She was speaking excitedly, and her voice rose. "God! I curse the day I lost my head over you! And now you've drained all my life's blood out of me. Everything Ivan said about you was the truth. You don't love anybody: not me, or the boys, or our life, or the system, or anything. Nobody and nothing. And you probably don't even love yourself. What're you living for then? What for?"

"That's interesting!" Though Fyodor rose up on his elbow, he could not see his wife's expression in the dark. All he saw was the dull, moist gleam of her eyes. "Anything else? Or is that all?"

"And the only reason you wanted to marry me was because my father was so rich. So that you could carry on at the retreat like he did."

"You don't say? Ha-ha!" His hoarse chuckle sounded more like a cough. "In case you've forgotten, I married you in 1919, when I was a partisan. By then all your riches had gone up in smoke."

"That's just how things turned out. What I said was

you wanted to. Before that. You were in love with Anfisa. You were even living with her then, but you wanted to marry me."

Fyodor, who had fallen back on his pillow, sat up quickly. Anna could hear his rapid breathing but continued,

"And as for everything we owned going up in smoke, that's what's been eating away at you all your life like a maggot."

"Don't talk about something you don't know anything about!" It was more of a moan than a request.

"I know what I'm talking about!" She also sat up. Anna was speaking rapidly, as if she was afraid Fyodor would interrupt her, would cover her mouth with his large hand or with a pillow, and then she would not be able to tell him what she wanted to. "And you're sorry for my father. Sorry Ivan shot him. You hate your own brother for that and for coming to his senses and going over to the partisans when he realized which side was fighting for justice. You've been taking it out on him all your life, because you can't take it out on anybody else. Or else you're afraid to. There. Nobody knows this side of you, but I do. And now Ivan's understood what you're really like, too. Now he's your bitter enemy." She was speaking still more rapidly now, sensing his large heavy body shaking beside her.

"Shut up, you!" His voice boomed in the silent kitchen as he struck her full force in the chest, throwing her back on the bed.

A moment later the light went on. It was Semyon, who had dashed into the kitchen in his underwear.

"What's the matter? Aren't you feeling well, Fyodor Silantievich?" Maria Firsovna asked anxiously from the doorway of her room.

Fyodor was sitting up in bed, leaning against the wall. His face was flushed and damp. "I'm all right. I just had a nightmare." Then he snapped, "Get out of here! What're you looking at?"

Maria Firsovna disappeared instantly. Semyon stood there for a moment.

"If you had a bad dream, turn over on your other side,

Pa," he said with a wry smile and switched off the light.

"There...." Fyodor heaved a sigh of relief and lay down. "You don't know what you're talking about. And I don't want to hear another word about the collective farm."

He was speaking in an unexpectedly calm voice. There was no hostility in it, but Anna was not listening. Her right breast ached. It felt swollen. As she massaged it she wept silently.

* * *

Just as Kirian Iniutin, peg-legged Demian's son, had had an eye on Anfisa since childhood, Ivan Savelyev had chosen Anna Kaftanova. He always stood up for her and she repaid him with a friendship that was just as sincere.

As soon as Anna was old enough, her father decided to send her to high school in Novonikolayevsk. A month before she was to leave Ivan became very depressed. On the day of her departure he stood by the fence, gazing at Anna with such sick eyes that she jumped out of the carriage and ran over to him.

"What's the matter? You know I'll be back next summer."

"But you'll be a city girl then. And you're going to a city school."

"Silly. There," she said, surprising herself by leaning over the fence and planting a kiss on his hot forehead. The blood rushed to his face, and even made his ears a bright-red.

Her kiss was the innocent kiss of a child, a mark of affection, reflecting their friendship and her trust. Yet, when she came home on vacation the following summer, Ivan felt awkward and shy in her presence. He often blushed for no good reason and made her blush as well. He seemed to be expecting something. She was aware of this, and it made her feel awkward, too. More important, it displeased her.

Anna's mother died in 1914. She did not die a natural death, but hanged herself on a rawhide thong. That

summer Anna was beside herself. She was driven to distraction by the commotion, by the cries and the wailing of strange women during the funeral. In the weeks until her departure she shielded away from people, spending her days wandering in the fields and the woods, and along the Gromotukha. Ivan often accompanied her.

"Why do you always keep tagging after me?" she shouted angrily one day, but the very next moment she grabbed hold of his hand and then pressed her face against his shoulder.

"Don't cry. It won't change anything," he said and stroked her shoulder.

"Why'd she do it? What for? "

"Fyodor told me it was on account of your pa. Because of the fancy ladies he takes out to the retreat." Ivan stumbled through his story, telling her what he knew.

"You're lying! It's all a pack of lies!" she screamed, jumping to her feet. "You and Fyodor are both liars! My Pa couldn't do anything like that!" However, calming down somewhat she said, "I've got to see for myself. I'm going there. Understand? And you figure out how I can get there. Ask Fyodor."

"How can I? He and Pa live out in the woods all the time. They never come here. They make wood tar."

"I don't know how, but you've got to think of some way."

One day he took her to Ognev Springs.

They approached the retreat in the dark, famished and dead tired. The two of them stood hidden behind the trees for a long time, staring at the brightly lit windows, listening to the drunken shouting, singing and women shrieking.

"There. See?" he said.

Anna had her arm around a tree trunk. She pushed away from it, went up to one of the windows and looked inside. The next moment her head jerked back, as if someone had smashed a fist into her face. She clapped her hands to her eyes, backed away and nearly fell.

Ivan led her into the woods. They sat down in the tall grass. Once again Anna lay with her head in his lap, sobbing wildly.

Ivan was going on fifteen and had begun smoking on

the sly. He now decided to roll himself a cigarette, stuck his hand into his pocket and made the matches rattle in the box. Anna quickly raised her head at the sound. The moonlight was reflected in her eyes.

"Give me the matches!" she demanded, snatching the box from his hand and then starting slowly towards the house.

"Anna! Anna!"

"Well?" she stopped. "Come on. You can help me jam the doors and windows. Then we'll spread straw all around the house."

Ivan was beside her in a bound. He grabbed her hand, forced open her fingers, took the matches away and flung the box into the bushes.

"What'd you want to do? You're crazy."

"You ... you!" Anna took a step back, swung and slapped him hard. "Go find the matches!" she slapped his face again. "Go find them!" She kept on slapping him, but Ivan did not fend off her blows. He just kept backing away.

They returned to Mikhailovka in silence, with Anna leading the way and Ivan walking behind.

The following day Anna took to her bed. She was delirious. She had been ill for over two weeks when Demian Iniutin entered the Savelyevs' cottage.

"Anna sent for you," he said, smiling slyly into his beard. "Go on."

As Ivan entered the Kaftanovs' house he heard Anna's father speaking to her in the adjoining room.

"What sort of company are you inviting? Why'd you send for Savelyev's boy? You're not kids any more."

"That's my business. He's my friend."

"It's about time you started using your head! You're nearly a grown woman, and he's a man."

"I said it's my business! If I want to, I'll even marry him."

"What's that? I'll pull your legs out if you do and tie them around your neck."

Hearing Iniutin's peg-leg tapping on the floor, the voices ceased. Kaftanov emerged from Anna's room sulking. He flashed an angry look at Ivan, but said nothing.

Anna lay in her bed. She was thin and pale. "You didn't tell anybody we went to the retreat, did you?"

"No."

"Don't. Thanks for throwing the matches away. And I'm sorry I slapped you." Her next question surprised him. "What do you know about your brother Anton?"

"Nothing. We don't even know where he is."

She was silent and then asked another strange question. "Does Fyodor have a scar where Iniutin pressed him to the cliff with a sword?"

"No. It all healed long ago."

They spoke for short while of this and that, but all the time Ivan kept hearing her say: "If I want to, I'll even marry him. If I want to, I'll even marry him."

As Ivan was crossing the yard, Kaftanov, who was standing beside one of his new warehouses, flashed another angry look at him and again said nothing.

That autumn, when Anna was to return to Novonikolayevsk, Ivan came to see her off. Unmindful of her father, she took both of his hands and said,

"Goodbye. Goodbye." She might have added something else, but her father was standing there, squinting at them like a tomcat.

When Anna drove off Kaftanov, still squinting, said, "There's something I'd like to know, Ivan. Did she choose you for her boyfriend?"

Ivan blushed so hard his neck turned pink. However, he couldn't refrain from saying, "Why d'you think I'm worse than anybody else? I'm a human being, too."

"Oho!" Kaftanov gaped. "I can see contrariness runs in the family. Come sit down over here, boy."

Ivan sat down gingerly beside Kaftanov's bulky frame. His heart was pounding rapidly. "If anybody could see me now! Sitting here next to Mikhail Lukich Kaftanov!"

Kaftanov, meanwhile, was talking slowly, eating sunflower seeds and spitting out the shells. "You'll have to let me be the judge as to whether you're worse than anybody else or not. If I take a liking to you, if I see you're devoted and work hard, you'll be doing yourself a good turn. You take Demian Iniutin, for instance. Who was he? Dirt. A thistle growing in a ditch. But he proved to be faithful and

devoted, and I made a man out of him. I was going to do the same with your brother Fyodor, but that stupid fool tried to bite me. It would've been easy for me to shove his teeth down his throat, but I'm a kind-hearted man. I can't tell you how many times after that your father and Fyodor came here on their knees, begging for any kind of work at all, saying the devil'd got into them when that no-good Anton showed up, and if he ever showed up again they'd bring him in, because they didn't know he was bucking the authorities. You know what I could've done? I could've kicked their faces in and then thrown them out. But I didn't. I said to hell with you, go on into the woods and fell trees, and make tar. It wasn't because I believed what they said about being sorry. I haven't forgotten how sharp their teeth are. No, I did it because I'm a kind-hearted man.

"Or you take my former clerk Polikarp Kruzhilin. I wanted to make a man of him, too. I was even going to bribe somebody to get him deferred. But then one day I overheard him talking to some peasants in my shop. He was telling them they'd never be able to live any better by wasting their breath cursing. He said you go on cursing my boss, Kaftanov, but that doesn't hurt him any, he still goes on bleeding you white. What a clown! That's when his convict-of-a-father's blood boiled up in him. Well, he's been conscripted, and maybe now that he's off fighting his brain'll clear some. But I haven't taken it out on his mother in any way. What for? I want Polikarp and your brother Fyodor to get a bellyful. I'm giving them time to think things over. They'll come crawling back to me on their hands and knees, because there's no place else for them to go. But they won't find me feeling as kindly towards them as I used to. I don't mind them making tar, but as for giving them cleaner, better-paid jobs, they'll have to wait till after they die for that. I'll give those jobs out to men I can trust. What I mean is, you put a candy in a fool's mouth and he'll spit it out. See what I mean? "

Though Ivan listened, he did not understand more than half of what Kaftanov was saying. When the latter finally stopped talking Ivan sat up with a start and said, "I'm listening."

"I'm glad you are. I'm going to give you a job as a groom to begin with, and we'll see how you make out. If you deserve a raise I'll put you in the shop as a clerk. You've had some schooling, haven't you? "

"I went to school for two years, but when I was promoted to the third grade Pa and Fyodor moved off to the forest, and Ma is sickly."

"No matter. It's not a matter of how educated you are, but of plain common sense. You've got to know which side your bread is buttered on." Kaftanov brushed some shells from his heavy thighs. "As for Anna, that's something we'll talk about later. If you prove you're devoted to me body and soul, well then ... there's an awful lot I can give a man for faithful service."

Thus, to his own astonishment, Ivan came to be Kaftanov's stable boy.

In the summer of 1916 Kaftanov took Anna out of the city high school for good, saying that from now on she'd have to take over her dead mother's duties in bringing up her baby brother Makar. She met this decision with mixed feelings, for Anna was not much of a student and felt out of place and awkward in town. Her classmates called her a hayseed and despised her. She was indeed tall and lanky, which made her appear to be taller still, so that all her clothes hung on her. Anna was going on seventeen, but there was no hint of the woman in her yet. Her shoulders were sharp, her legs were long and thin, her breasts were practically non-existent, and she was positive that she was fated to go through life looking like a scarecrow, and that she would always be despised and mocked at as the plump, high-bosomed merchant's daughters who were her classmates mocked her. Still and all, she was sorry to be leaving the city and the high school which had opened up a little window on the world for her.

On her very first evening at home Anna decided to go for a walk. She wandered slowly down to the Gromotukha. As she was crossing the field, the sun dipped half-way down beyond the horizon. It was setting beyond the Gromotukha, turning the river copper-red, so that it seemed the sun was not setting, but melting and the

molten mass was streaming hotly along the ground towards her.

"Anna! " someone called.

Ivan Savelyev was standing beside her. He had on a blue cotton shirt and creased linen pants. He was barefoot. His feet were calloused and dirty. Seeing Anna's eyes on his feet, he became embarrassed. "Are you home on vacation?"

"No. I think I'm home for good. Pa said I've had enough learning."

"Boy! That's grand! "

"What's so grand about it? "

Ivan and Anna sat on the bluff, watching the feeble, cooling waves lap at the bank and lick the still-warm stones. The sun sank in the molten waters of the Gromotukha. The light in the river went out instantly. A large dark cloud appeared in the west, to the left of where the sun had set. It was moving towards them quickly. They heard the first distant roll of thunder. Anna rose and headed slowly towards Mikhailovka. Ivan trudged along behind.

The rain caught up with them outside the village, coming in a downpour. Though the cloud seemed to be far beyond the Gromotukha, everything suddenly became very dark. Ivan and Anna were engulfed in a wave of cold air. An instant later sheets of rain came down on them, spattering everything, rising from the ground as mist, drenching them.

Anna cried out and ran towards an old, deserted, roofless hut at the edge of the village. The ceiling had collapsed in several places, and rain was pouring in through the holes and gaping windows. Anna found a dry spot and pressed against the peeling, once-white wall. Ivan stood beside her. When he brushed against her shoulder he felt her body shaking from the cold.

"I'm c-cold," she said, and he imagined that she moved closer. He stood in front of her, pressing her back against the wall.

"Stop it! " she cried in a muffled voice.

"I'll warm you up," he whispered, put his hands on her shoulders and bent his face towards hers, kissing the corner

of her mouth.

"Ivan! " She pushed him away, run off a few steps, buried her face in her hands and sobbed bitterly.

"What's the matter? I didn't want to hurt you."

"How could you! "

"I don't know. Honest."

"You wanted to make fun of me! I'm ugly and awful."

"Why'd you say that? You're pretty. I can see that. And you'll be still prettier."

She raised her face. "How can you see? "

"I just can. And I'll marry you, if you want to. And your Pa promised."

Indeed, in the course of the winter and the spring Kaftanov had on several occasions spoken to Ivan half-seriously when he had come into the stables and stroked the prancing horses. "I can see you're working hard, boy, and trying hard. Before you know it, you might really earn Anna. Good for you. You're not like your brothers at all. You go on doing your best, and don't ever forget I'm a man of my word. Or don't you love her any more? You still do? There, look at you, blushing like a maiden! See you don't suffocate from all that color."

Sometimes Ivan felt that Kaftanov was teasing him like he would a baby and that he would never in his life let his daughter marry him. However, the previous day, having told Ivan to harness up the stallion, Kaftanov had said in what had seemed to Ivan a serious tone of voice,

"Listen closely, Ivan. I'm leaving on a long business trip, so don't you try any monkey-business with Anna. If you touch her before your time comes, I'll take the shears and snip your head off. I'm not afraid of having to account for what I do here on earth, and I'll manage somehow in heaven. Understand? "

It was a hard but short downpour. The cloud rolled over Mikhailovka and moved on. The light sky of evening came through the holes in the ceiling, as heavy drops fell onto the rotted floor.

"What do you mean Pa promised? " Anna demanded, her arms shielding her flat chest. Her large gray, almond

eyes, clear and already beautiful, looked puzzled. "Who'd he promise?"

"Me."

"You?" Anna's long brows twitched like tiny wings. She stood there thoughtfully and then went out of the hut, saying, "You wait a while and then come out, or they'll see we're together." She walked down the muddy village street, lost in thought.

* * *

In 1914 Demian Iniutin suddenly expressed a desire to be the village elder.

"What for?" Kaftanov demanded and frowned. "Don't I pay you enough? Besides stealing whatever you want to from me."

"Heaven preserve us! You've no account to say that, Mikhail Lukich."

"You peg-legged fool! Can't you see how much we've got to do now? This is wartime. I've signed a contract for large deliveries of grain and produce. I've got to build warehouses now."

"An elder doesn't have that much to do. It's just for my own pleasure. I'll work for you as hard as I ever did."

"Ah, to hell with you! Go on and get your pleasure," Kaftanov said, giving in to him.

Late that autumn, shortly before the first snow of the year, Fyodor Savelyev bumped into the village elder, Iniutin, on the street one dark, rainy evening.

"Ah-ha! What d'you know?" Demian snickered. "Come on over to my house. It's too windy out here." Then, seeing that Fyodor hesitated, he added in a sterner voice, "Come on in. I want to talk to you about your work."

Kirian was away at school in Shantara, so that only his wife was at home. She had been a thin, frail woman, but after Demian had come back from the Russo-Japanese War, she had begun to gain weight rapidly, becoming so enormous in a few years' time that she had to pass through the doorway sideways. She nearly died of the heat every

summer. It was common knowledge that on the hottest, most sultry days she would find escape from the heat in the ice-cellar, lying there on cool pillows and wheezing like a boar in its pen.

She waddled like a goose when she carried in the boiling samovar and then waddled out again.

"She's not long for this world," Iniutin said. "The fat is killing her. She hardly eats at all, but she keeps on getting fatter. It's a sickness. Come on, let's warm our insides with some tea. Go on."

Fyodor was surprised, but he accepted a cup.

They drank the tea from their saucers in silence for about half an hour. Every now and then Iniutin would fix his sneaky eyes on Fyodor, making Fyodor wince and sweat, either from the tea or from his gaze.

Finally Iniutin rose and tapped over to the coat rack. He rummaged in his jacket pockets, came back to the table and thrust a ten-ruble bill at Fyodor.

"What's this for?" Fyodor was frightened. He hid his hands behind his back.

"Take it!" Demian shouted, making Fyodor jump.

As Fyodor reached for the money, his hand shook.

"What crud!" Demian was so angry he turned purple. "You're nothing but shit, but you think you're something. You want to know what it's for? For telling us where your brother Anton was hiding!"

"Me?" Fyodor pushed the bill away. He was stunned. "It was you who tailed me when I went to Zvenigora! You nearly ran me through with that sword, but I still didn't tell you."

"Shut up! I've had my eye on you for a long time, boy. Mikhail Lukich turned the wrong key when he tried to get you by the throat. And I saw that that was something you'd never take lying down. When I understood that I said to myself I'd never get my hands around your neck or anything else. I've got you where I want you, and you won't get off the hook now. Now you tell me what you'll say to prove I'm wrong when I spread the word around that you led us to Snake Gorge and pointed your finger to where your brother was hiding. There's nothing easier than to spread the word."

"As soon as Anton gets back he'll say you're lying."

"And who knows when that'll be? Meanwhile, you'll look pretty bad. Then again, who knows if he'll ever come back? He escaped again, but they caught him anyway. There'll soon be a noose waiting for him."

Fyodor sank onto the stool. Iniutin bent over, picked up the bill from the floor and stuck it into Fyodor's sweaty hand. He limped up and down and spoke as if nothing were amiss.

"Your stubbornness ruined your whole life, my boy. Mikhail Lukich could've done an awful lot for you, but you had to go and show him your fangs. I might as well tell you Kaftanov only likes men who're easy to get along with. Like me, for instance. You're cut off and forgotten as far as he's concerned. Well then, as I said, I've had my eye on you for a long time. You've got the greedy eyes of a wild cat. As I recall, you looked ready to snort from envy whenever Kaftanov came out to the retreat for a roaring old time with his lady-friends. You were still a snot-nosed kid then, but I could see your legs a-trembling."

Fyodor jumped up and turned red in the face as he glared at Iniutin and sensed his own utter helplessness.

"Don't you touch me, old man! " he said hoarsely. "I'm warning you! There'll be hell to pay. And that's the God-honest truth."

"Sure enough. I told you I understand the kind of fellow you are. You were ready to run me through with a pitchfork when you were still a kid." A harsher note appeared in his voice and his sly little smile disappeared. "There's only one thing you didn't figure on, my boy, and that was that you've got no protection left now, except me. You didn't take that into account, but it doesn't mean I didn't."

The wind was so strong it rattled the shutters and seemed about to blow in the windows. Two tall old pines grew outside Iniutin's house. Their branches kept hitting against the shingled roof so that it seemed someone with a peg leg was thumping clumsily about on the roof.

"Now, you listen here, Fyodor, and this is the God-

honest truth, too. Listen to what I'm going to tell you, and see what profit there is in it for you. I've thought it over, and I see as where you can be a valuable man to me in time. Kaftanov's thrown you out, and I'm picking you up, you see. That's because I need a man I can trust, too. Naturally, I'm no Kaftanov, but I'm second in command in the village now, and in some ways I'm even first. So. That means I've got to know what the village men are talking about. What they're saying about me and Kaftanov, and what kind of thoughts their heads are full of. It doesn't really matter one way or the other, but still, just for curiosity's sake."

"That's great! You want to hire me as your spy, and all for ten rubles! "

Iniutin continued, ignoring Fyodor's outburst, "I've hated your whole family on account of your brother Anton, and I've been driving you hard all this time. I confess, it's a human failing, but if you really get down to it, it's stupid, too. All right, I'll find some kind of a job for your pa. And for you, too. Though Mikhail Lukich doesn't like your pa. He says he's a fine worker, but he's spawned a slew of wolf cubs. No matter, I've taken a kindlier view, and I'll try to soften him up. Now, then. I'll pay you three rubles a month over and above your earnings. This ten rubles is for the bargain." He came up to Fyodor, exhaled into his face and seemed to punch him twice as he said, "Well, then? "

Fyodor backed away. He shook his head. "You louse! What are you talking about? What are you trying to make me do, you rotten old stump? "

"I might be rotten for somebody, but I might be filled with gold for you," Iniutin replied, smiling slyly. Then, seeing that Fyodor was about to throw down the money again, his dry, yellow lips twitched and he shook with rage. "Think what you're doing, you fool! You opened your mouth once before, and all your luck fell out, so the next time you keep it shut tight if you're not plain crazy! And don't you try to go back on me or I'll put a brand on you that'll last all your life! You just wait till I spread the word about Anton and you. Go on. Go on home and do some thinking. You come back here Sunday night and tell

me if you're willing. That's when you'll get your first three rubles." He prodded Fyodor towards the door, whispering as he did, "Why, there's nothing to it. Just keep your ears open and then tell me. You'll be getting your money for nothing, and I'll always stand up for a fellow who works for me. You think about it, Fyodor. You're a smart fellow. I'll be waiting for you Sunday night."

* * *

That Sunday Fyodor entered Demian Iniutin's house. Although he was very red in the face, he received his first three-ruble bill.

* * *

Demian Iniutin did not keep his puny son Kirian, whose skin was as sallow as withered swamp grass, in school for long. Kirian attended the Shantara church school together with Anna Kaftanova for several years until Demian decided he had had enough schooling. Demian had long since decided that Kirian would one day take over his own duties, and his was not a job that called for a lot of education. What it did call for was quick wits and a hard hand.

However, the idea of Kirian taking over one day was a reserve plan, so to speak. Demian had other hopes for his son and they were concealed deep within his heart for the present. As he tossed in his bed, unable to sleep, he would say to himself that Anna Kaftanova and Kirian were the same age, and that the time would come when Anna would need a man.

As he lay under the heavy quilt, enveloped by the stuffy darkness, Demian Iniutin would lay his plans. First, Kirian would marry Anna. Kaftanov was aging quickly, since his wild orgies were ruining his health. It was high time he laid off, but he wouldn't. Kaftanov was trying to keep up with his son Zinovy now, when the two of them held their kennels, as Silanty Savelyev called their orgies.

Demian had nothing against those wild parties. One day the two Kaftanovs might drink themselves stupid and then.... After all, they had lain there at the retreat in a drunken stupor, dead to the world, many a time. Now on some winter evening in the future, when they'd both be drunk, and the ovens would be stoked hotter than usual, and the flues would be shut before their time, with the blue tongues of coal gas still flickering in the fireboxes.... They'd moan in their drunken sleep and would finally stop breathing. Nobody'd be able to prove anything. They'd be pronounced dead of coal gas poisoning while in a drunken stupor. It was nothing out of the ordinary. And then what? Then there'd be only Anna and little Makar left of all the Kaftanov family, and there were so many things that could carry off a child. He might turn over a pot of boiling water on himself by accident, or else catch his death out in the cold. Indeed. Anything might happen. And that would be the end of a family named Kaftanov. Which would leave the Iniutins to start their own family tree.

These thoughts acted like coal gas fumes upon Demian as he lay underneath the heavy quilt. His red beard would become dark, and he would stick his head out from under the covers and gasp for air.

These dreams were sweet, but Iniutin was smart enough to know that they were still a far way off from being realized. Perhaps they would never be. The main reason lay in the fact that Kirian was so puny and ugly. He was so funny-looking that Kaftanov once said, "What's the matter with him? His mouth looks like a place for flies to breed."

There were times when Demian hated his only son for being so weak. Still and all, he kept saying to himself that it was just temporary, that he'd get stronger as he got older, and his body would fill out. Not a day passed that he wouldn't say,

"Why do you spend all your time playing with Anfisa? What do you want to play with that beggar girl for? You go play with Anna Kaftanova."

"She scratches," Kirian would reply. "Anfisa's nice."

For the present, Demian was not too worried about his

son having chosen Anfisa for a playmate. Anfisa was thin and dark-eyed, and had long arms. The general impression one got of her was of a cornered animal.

Iniutin became really worried when Kaftanov decided to send his daughter to high school in Novonikolayevsk, although he tried to conceal this. However, whenever the chance arose he would sigh and say, "I hope to God she learns a lot there. Then she'll be a real lady. But don't you forget, Mikhail Lukich, she's a country girl, and trusting. There's all kind of fast fellows in the big cities. What if they ruin the girl or something? Then what? If she comes back with a bad reputation, you know she won't ever live it down here in the village. It'll hound her all her life. But maybe you're figuring on setting her up in town? Then that won't make any difference."

Recently Makar, who had been under Lusha Kashkaro's care since his mother's death, had fallen ill and had ailed all through the winter. Kaftanov, fearing for the boy's life, had even stopped drinking.

"Never can tell what can happen to a child who's in somebody else's care," Iniutin had said on several occasions. "So you watch out, Mikhail Lukich. I don't care if you get angry at me for saying this, but I'm telling you the truth. What's somebody else's child to a woman? But you have your own nursemaid for him: Anna."

This, apparently, decided the matter. Kaftanov went to the city for Anna himself.

Iniutin was well aware of the friendship that existed between Anna and Ivan, but he was positive that Kaftanov would strangle his daughter with his own hands before he would let Ivan marry her.

Iniutin finally became worried about his son's friendship with Anfisa, the widow Nastasia's daughter. At fourteen Anfisa suddenly began to fill out. Her small, pointed breasts were plainly discernible beneath her blouse, and blue-black sparks began to dance in her eyes. Kirian was two years older than she. He had at last become a bit stronger and broader in the shoulders. He wore his hair combed back off his face like a man and had stopped sniffing. Iniutin noticed that whenever Anfisa met Kirian her cheeks seemed as though they would burst from the

sudden rush of blood to her face, while Kirian seemed just as shy. His eyes would film over, as if he had had a glass of home-brew.

"You idiot! You damn idiot!" Iniutin thundered, hopping about on his peg leg. "I can see when you were both silly kids, but now! What's so special about that beggar's bitch? Don't let me catch you near her again!"

Kirian listened in silence. He rubbed his slim hand against his broad forehead. Iniutin knew for a fact that Kirian was following Anfisa around like a shadow. A week before Anna Kaftanova was to return home for good he had overheard him speaking behind the sagging wattle fence outside widow Nastasia's tumbledown house one evening.

"Don't put too much store by me not being handsome, Anfisa. I'm handsome inside. You'll see. I'll always be as happy with you as I am now. And I'm faithful to my friends till the end."

"For shame!" Anfisa cried. Then her voice became muffled. "What're you talking about? How can I even think about getting married?"

"I don't mean now. Maybe in a year from now, or two, or three. I just wanted you to know."

Iniutin froze in his tracks. His wooden leg seemed to have taken root.

"Your pa won't ever let you marry me, not in a year, or even in ten. And that's what my ma says, too," Anfisa replied in a very grown-up voice.

"He won't have any choice. I'm stubborn. Nobody knows how stubborn I am. I don't care if he doesn't consent. I'll take you to Shantara. Or even farther away. We'll work, and we'll make out."

They were silent for a while.

"But do you like me? Just a little?" Kirian suddenly asked.

"I don't know. Sometimes I think I do, and then sometimes I think I don't." She sighed and continued just as guilelessly, "I don't know why, but I like older boys. When I look at them I get prickly all over. Especially when I see your friend Fyodor Savelyev, though I'm scared of him more than anybody else. I met him on the road this

winter. When he twitched his moustache it sent shivers down my back. Why'd he grow a moustache like a man? You tell him it makes him look awful."

"You tell him yourself," Kirian muttered.

"Oh! Somebody's standing there!" she exclaimed.

It was Iniutin, who had moved and scraped the sole of his only boot on the ground. He heard them hurry away and stood there for a while before limping off. There was a mean smile on his face, for now, at last, he knew how to wrench his son away from Anfisa.

* * *

The war was something very remote to the inhabitants of Mikhailovka. Their only contact with it occurred when the village men were called up for active service. Those called up were Pankrat Nazarov, the former village elder, skinny Yevsei Galanshin, Petrovan Golovlyov, a grown, black-bearded man, and half a dozen young boys. Their relatives bewailed the departure of the recruits. They accompanied them on wagons as far as Shantara, returning home as silent and depressed as if they had been to a funeral. Then life continued along its usual course, and a dull and difficult life it was.

Indeed, one might have thought the men and boys had been taken off to a cemetery, for a year passed, and then another, and the third had begun, but except for two letters from Pankrat Nazarov, in which he did not mention any of the others, and the three or four letters Arina Kruzhilina received from her son Polikarp there was no word from anyone. No one knew what Kaftanov's former clerk Polikarp wrote in his letters. Arina was illiterate, but did not entrust them to anyone in Mikhailovka. Instead she took each letter to Shantara, to Tosya, the young daughter of the local teacher. Each time she returned she seemed somehow more dignified, but more taciturn than before, and to all her neighbors' questions she would reply, "He's all right."

The Kruzhilins were not natives of Mikhailovka. Hardly any of the villagers remembered Arina's husband,

Matvei, who had died more than twenty-five years before. "His cough did him in. He coughed his lungs out," Arina said when he died, pressing her infant son to her breast, as if fearing that someone might take him from her.

Old men who were no longer among the living themselves had said that Matvei Kruzhilin was a former convict. He had lived someplace across the Ural Mountains in the European part of Russia where serfdom had been the way of the land. They said that Matvei had started a mutiny, and that he and the peasants who had followed him had burned down their landlord's estate and had then pinned the landlord to the ground with a pitchfork. That's when young Matvei Kruzhilin had been put in irons and sent to Siberia. For twelve years he had worked in irons, and then for many years after had lived in Narym under police surveillance. Finally, in 1890, he and his pregnant, pock-marked wife Arina had come to Mikhailovka. He had made them a dugout at the edge of the village, but had died a year later.

After his death Arina had worked as a hired woman for the Kaftanovs, who were just beginning to rise then. She and her son Polikarp still lived in the dugout, but he grew up strong and healthy despite this. Polikarp began smoking and drinking at an early age. He would sometimes tag along with a passing Gypsy camp, sometimes going off with them for the summer, but always returning home in autumn with the coming of cold weather. He would come home filthy and lice-infested, but wearing good clothes, with money in his pockets. Be that as it may, he and his mother soon left their dark, damp burrow of a hovel and bought an old hut at the far end of the village.

That was when Kaftanov took notice of Polikarp.

"Where'd you find the money to buy yourself a house, boy?" he asked Kruzhilin one day, stopping him outside his shop. "Did you earn it or steal it?"

"Half and half," Polikarp replied boldly.

"Hm." Kaftanov chuckled. "Can you dance like the Gypsies do?"

"A bit."

"Let's see."

"For nothing? You can tell your wife to dance for

nothing when you go to bed."

"Hm," Kaftanov said again. He took out his wallet and plucked out a twenty-kopek piece.

"And how about a shot for good cheer? To make my feet go faster."

"You son-of-a-bitch! You mean you've learned to guzzle vodka, too?"

"A little bit of everything. Why? Can't you spare it?"

A crowd of idlers had gathered outside the shop. Kaftanov ordered a bottle to be brought out.

Polikarp had on a green silk shirt of the kind favored by Gypsies then. It was belted with a dirty silk corded belt. He was wearing a fine pair of boots. Accepting a glass of vodka from Kaftanov, he emptied it in several sips, surprising Kaftanov and the other men by the calm way in which he had downed it. Then he tossed the glass to one of the onlookers, walked slowly past the porch, as if demanding that they step back to make a wider circle. He stood still for a moment, as though pondering over something, and even picked at his nose like a boy. "You can't dance if there's no music!" he said.

There was a burst of derisive laughter.

"A poor dancer always finds something wrong: either the music's no good, or his feet get in his way."

At that moment Polikarp let out a yell, shook his long, curly hair and started out, bent slightly at the waist and moving sideways, making the circle wider still. When he had come abreast of Kaftanov he danced away from him, his feet beating a rapid tattoo on the ground, his hands slapping his chest, knees and the sides of his boots loudly. The snickering and joking stopped. Kaftanov, who had been sitting on the porch steps, rose in amazement. Meanwhile, Polikarp let out another guttural Gypsy cry and began spinning like a top, raising clouds of dust.

Polikarp danced for at least five minutes, doing every imaginable step, half of which were truly acrobatic feats. All the while he kept up his loud, merciless slapping. He then flew up onto the porch, thrusting Kaftanov aside, and there he did such a wild tap dance it seemed the little porch would disintegrate. Finally, after a last cry, he braced his hands on the edge of the porch, did a hand-

stand, clicked his heels in the air so loudly it sounded as if someone had fired a shot, then did a somersault and landed on his feet to stand stock still. He breathed loudly three or four times, fixed his belt, looked around at the men and said,

"You can't really dance without music. It's like soup without meat. You can eat it, but there's no taste to it." Then, passing through the crowd that parted silently for him, he disappeared around the corner of the shop.

"That son-of-a-bitch! " Kaftanov breathed in awe.

Six months later he took Polikarp on as a clerk in his shop and then transferred him to Shantara, giving him a very good salary, much larger than any the other clerks were receiving. This surprised no one. Nor was anyone surprised when Kaftanov made his young clerk the caretaker of his forest retreat. When the First World War broke out many of the villagers said,

"You can bet your life Kaftanov'll pay to get his pet off from serving."

"That's for sure. He's training him to be a real dog. And he'll be one."

That was why everyone was so amazed to learn that Polikarp Kruzhilin had been called up together with the other boys.

However, unlike the others, no one bewailed his departure. When he came to Mikhailovka to say goodbye to his mother he was not alone. Tosya Kulichenko, the schoolteacher's daughter, was with him. She was slim and lithe, her eyes were as big as saucers, and she had a long, heavy braid down her back.

"This is Tosya, Ma. If I come back alive, we'll get married right away. She has fine parents, and they've agreed. Meanwhile, Tosya'll be waiting for me. Will you? "

"I'll be waiting for you till I get old," she replied in a choked voice as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Come on, now! " Polikarp sounded annoyed. "You promised you wouldn't."

That very evening Polikarp and Tosya left Mikhailovka. From then on Arina would take Tosya the letters she received from her son.

For the past six months, however, there had been no

word from him, either. Arina went in to Shantara nearly every week, and each time she returned she looked more worried. Tosya had apparently not had any letters from him, either.

Then one fine day Polikarp showed up in Mikhailovka.

He arrived in the afternoon, having hitched a ride on a wagon. He was just skin and bones. He had a brush cut and wearing a long soldier's greatcoat with tattered edges. His bandaged left arm was in a sling made of a bright kerchief which was probably Tosya's. She helped him down and then rushed towards his mother, who was running towards them, and who would have swooned if Tosya had not caught her.

"My boy! Polikarp! "

"He's here! Mamma! Don't worry, his arm'll heal! " Tosya shouted through her tears of joy.

Half an hour later the Kruzhilins' little cottage was crowded to overflowing. Old men sat solemnly on benches along the walls, while the women and children stood in the doorway. Newcomers kept elbowing their way through, for Polikarp was the first soldier to have returned to Mikhailovka. The newcomers would enter, glance up at the small, blackened icon in the corner and cross themselves. They would greet the gathering and then stare at Polikarp fearfully and curiously.

* * *

Fyodor came in from the woods at Demian Iniutin's summons. He steamed the dirt off his body in the bath-house, from where he returned at midnight, downed the better part of a bottle of home-brew, fell into bed and slept until noon of the following day.

When he got up he polished off the rest of the bottle, went over to the window, looked out and saw Anna Kaftanova at the far end of the street. She was walking along, holding her three-year-old brother Makar's hand. He was cranky and seemed to be whining. Anna would stop and speak to him every so often.

Fyodor tugged at his thin moustache as he watched her

and recalled that once, long ago, when he had been a caretaker at the retreat vague thoughts had stirred in his brain: what if Kaftanov let him marry Anna? Then, after Anton's escape and arrest, these thoughts had evaporated, never to return or bother him, especially since Anna was obviously growing up to be an angular, flat-chested woman. "It's a case of good food going to waste, and that's for sure," he would say to himself with a smile whenever he came across her. "You can stick her in a fence instead of a plank any day."

During the last year or so Fyodor had become aware of his brother Ivan's friendship for Anna and would sometimes tease him.

"They say there's a couple of mighty fine suitors in the village now: you and Kirian Iniutin. Am I right? He's just like a little cockerel, too, flapping around Anfisa."

Ivan would blush and shug him off.

However, when Kaftanov took Ivan on as his stable boy, Fyodor began to feel anxious and annoyed. Sometimes, quite unaccountably and unwontedly, uneasy thoughts would nag at him: "There can't be anything between Anna and Ivan. But still, stranger things've happened. Kaftanov's wild. What if he says.... Sure, Anna's as flat as a boy, but that doesn't count for anything. Kaftanov's wife was a real beanpole, but it didn't bother him. Why the hell did Anton have to show up at the retreat? I've ruined my chances because of him, damn him! "

That spring Fyodor said to himself, "I'm going to try my luck with Anna. If anything comes of it, Kaftanov can bash his head against the wall and howl, but he'll have to consent. And if nothing comes of it, at least I'll ruin her reputation. Don't you think, you rat, that I've forgotten the time you nearly choked me. I'll never forget that."

Fyodor's plan did not come to him suddenly, nor did it take root on an empty spot, as they say. He had grown up to be handsome and well-built, and he knew his worth. The village girls had been stealing glances at him for quite some time, and he had caught their timid and curious eyes on him. Kaftanov's daughter, too, as she grew older, began glancing at him in the same curious, shy way. He took especial note of this, and whenever he encountered her his

eyes would narrow and he would appraise her silently. Anna would always hurry on.

Recalling all this, Fyodor stood watching her coming down the street. Then he went outside and leaned against the porch wall in the shade, so that she would not immediately notice him. She was walking down the street slowly, glancing as if by accident at the Savelyevs' house every now and then. "Is she looking for Ivan?" It was an unpleasant thought and it irked him.

"Ivan went to the woods this morning," he said, coming out of the shadows.

At the sight of him her hands flew to her breast. She stared at him accusingly.

"Don't you pine away for him, Anna," he said and smiled, "because I've been thinking about you, too, all the time I was out in the woods. How're me and my brother going to share you?"

She dropped her arms, exhaled strangely, for it sounded more like a sob, snatched up her brother and hurried off down a side street, never once looking back. Her long skirt flapped against her legs like a green flame.

Looking after her, Fyodor was trying to think of a way he could meet her when she was alone. That evening, as he was on his way to the village elder's house, he heard someone exclaim,

"Why, if it's not Fyodor Savelyev! "

It was Polikarp Kruzhilin. He was standing behind a low fence. Fyodor had heard his mother say that Polikarp had just got back from the war, but he had not recognized him. Polikarp's wild black locks had been shorn. His eyes were sunken and his cheekbones were prominent. He was not very tall, but now that all that was left of him was skin and bones, he seemed taller and alien in his faded army shirt.

Polikarp was staring hard at Fyodor. For some reason or other Fyodor suddenly recalled Kaftanov having said, "Polikarp Kruzhilin was a great one for steaming in the bath-house." Kaftanov had also said that he had been sorry to get rid of Polikarp but had had to, because Polikarp had suddenly got to looking at him in a funny way every so



often, as if the son-of-a-bitch was going to stick a knife into him.

Fyodor had not forgotten Kaftanov's words. In fact, he might have spoken them yesterday. Now Fyodor felt the sharpness of Polikarp's eyes on him. There was something else, too. Polikarp's keen gaze reminded him of someone. After a moment's thought he realized he reminded him of his brother Anton.

"Come on in, Fyodor," Polikarp said, opening the gate.

Fyodor crossed the yard. A table and a gleaming samovar had been set under an old birch tree, and a girl with large eyes and a long braid down her back was clearing the table.

"Tosya, this is Fyodor Savelyev. He's been slaving for Kaftanov all his life, too. Who's his caretaker out at the retreat now? "

"I don't know. I just got back from the taiga yesterday."

The girl smiled at Fyodor as she carried the samovar back into the house.

"How're you making out in the taiga? "

"All right. We're working."

"What about the men? "

"What about them? "

"What're they saying? What do they think about the way things are? "

"How the hell do I know? If the food's bad, they curse Kaftanov. And what men are you talking about? There's nobody left here but old men and women now."

"What're they saying about the war? "

"Nothing much. The ones that had their men called up used to bawl at first, but then they stopped. All they do now is pray."

"Is that all? "

"What else is there? "

Polikarp said nothing. He was looking off thoughtfully and drumming his fingers on the table. "Well, Fyodor, from what I see, life here's like a stinking swamp. Kaftanov's having himself a ball here."

"He'll be having himself a ball anyplace he goes with all that money."

"You think so?" Polikarp looked at him quickly. "There's no telling, though."

Fyodor wanted to ask him why Kaftanov might not make out as well in some other place, but he couldn't muster up the courage to do so.

"Hear anything about your brother Anton?"

"No."

The sun set beyond Zvenigora. It seemed to have fallen through the earth at the foot of the mountain, because its rays were now shooting straight up into the sky. A breeze carried a wave of cold air, rustling the dusty, brittle leaves of the old birch.

"Are you going back to work for Kaftanov?" Fyodor asked.

"You don't think he'll take me on again, do you? But that doesn't bother me. I'll find something."

"How are things up there at the front?"

"You really interested?"

"They say I might be called up soon."

"You? I don't think they'll take you now. It's too late for that."

"What d'you mean? Is the war going to end?"

"It looks like it."

Fyodor felt uneasy as he left the yard, for he sensed Polikarp's keen eyes on his back and decided there really were daggers in them, because all the while he and Polikarp had been sitting at the table, they had bored through him, as if Polikarp was trying to see what made Fyodor tick.

Instead of going straight to Iniutin's house, Fyodor sat under a withered pine in a grove until twilight, watching the crags of Zvenigora turn black as they cooled.

A light breeze was making the top of the old pine sway. It creaked softly and mournfully, as if complaining of the gathering darkness, the night, its old age and loneliness. Crows were circling over it.

The very thought of having to see Iniutin, of having to look at his stringy beard, his round, watery eyes, his bristly, horseshoe-shaped mouth, made Fyodor sick to his stomach. Nevertheless, he finally started out. The wind was flinging about the invisible clouds overhead, opening up broad swatches of star-studded sky that resembled

clearings dotted with yellow flowers.

There were only two lights on in the village, for there had been a shortage of kerosene ever since the outbreak of war. One light was on in the shop and the other was in a second-story window in Kaftanov's house. "Whose window is that? Could it be Anna's?" Fyodor wondered, glad to have something to think about besides peg-legged Iniutin.

He walked towards the light, although Iniutin's house was in the opposite direction.

Fyodor wandered about the warehouses outside Kaftanov's house for about ten minutes and then stood outside the picket fence, looking up at the lighted window. Now he knew for sure that it was Anna's window. He had glimpsed the shadow of her head on the wall several times, and then she had appeared at the window and pulled the flowered curtains to. Without actually realizing what he was doing, Fyodor sailed over the fence, ran up to the house. He picked up a handful of sand and earth and tossed it at her window. There was a pattering sound as the sand hit the glass. A shadow crossed the curtain. The light went out. He tossed another handful of sand at the window and then stood still, listening attentively, waiting for something, but heard nothing, save a dog barking at the far end of the village. He crossed the yard slowly.

The house stood on a very large plot of land along a deserted lane, with its windows facing the village. There had once been wasteland around it, but the village men had made it into gardens. About a hundred and fifty yards behind the house were the cowsheds, the stables, the granaries and various outbuildings, all scattered about in a small grove. It was a very convenient spot for these buildings, because a small wood adjoined them, with roads through it leading right up to Kaftanov's land. The area between the house and the outbuildings was given over to a vegetable garden, an orchard and rows of berry bushes. Kaftanov's dead wife, a great one for making jam, would get the village women to clear weed-covered plots, dig holes and plant wild apple, ashberry and chokecherry trees, and sea buck thorn bushes. In several years' time she had a good orchard, but after her death both the orchard

and the berry plantation were growing wild. Kaftanov had a part of the orchard chopped down to make room for the three long warehouses that were built on either side of the house. Most of the remaining berry bushes were trampled or broken, as were the remaining trees in the orchard, while warehouses were being built, so that all that remained were a few sorry trees and bushes.

"And Kaftanov thinks he's a good manager! " Fyodor muttered. "It was real pretty here, and there was so much fruit and berries. They say his wife used to make barrels of jam. And there were the ground chokecherries and dried raspberries. If they couldn't eat it all, they could've sold it. That's what I'd do if it was mine. And he could've built the warehouses behind the stables. There's plenty of space for them there."

Fyodor mourned the ruined orchard as if it were his own, although he did not realize it.

He was soon back at the porch again. The moon rose, casting its light up on the high porch, the railing, the stout doors and the iron ring of a knob. The ring suddenly moved. Fyodor darted behind a bush. His heart was pounding. He was positive it was Anna.

Indeed, as the door opened softly she appeared, wearing the same blouse and green skirt as she had during the day, the only difference being that her hair was now loose, as if she had just awakened and dressed, but had not had time to braid it.

She was acting strangely. First, she stuck her head out of the door and listened for something. Then she emerged onto the porch and stood there, flattened against the door jamb. She was breathing rapidly. After a while she went to the gate and stopped, looking over the picket fence into the deserted lane. When Fyodor crept up to her he heard her singing softly:

*The rowan tree sways
In the darkness of night,
And a young girl yearns
As she waits....*

He spoke in an undertone, "Is she waiting for me? "
"Oh! "

If someone had brought a whip down across her back she would not have spun around so quickly.

"What're you scared of? I don't bite."

"Go away!" she cried faintly, moving with her back to the fence as if she were going to fall sideways.

Fyodor did not let her fall. He grabbed her firmly, pressed her against the fence and felt her knees shaking. His hand slipped down her shoulder until it rested on the rise of her breast which he squeezed as he got his other hand on the back of her head and, overcoming her resistance, drew it towards himself and kissed her hot, dry lips. She moaned and fought him as he kissed her, but then suddenly went limp in his arms.

"And that's all there is to it," he thought and smiled to himself. Fyodor picked her up, carried her past the house and the warehouses to a thicket in the distance. Her long hair hit against his knees, her arms grasped his neck, and she kept repeating,

"I thought you were gone. I thought you were gone."

When he lay her down on the ground she did not resist, but she did say in a low and thoughtful voice,

"Do you want to make a woman of me? Go ahead. But I want you to know that I'll hang myself after. Like my Ma did." She turned on her side and began to sob bitterly, hitting her head against the warm, sweet, grass-covered earth so that her hair was spread out all around her.

Fyodor, frightened by what she had said, cooled off immediately. As he stared at her he was thinking, "She will too. She's just like her ma. And I'll be responsible. Kaftanov'll slit my throat. He'll take the law into his own hands. No, thanks."

His heart was thundering, as would a man's who had escaped death by a hair's breadth. "No, sir. This isn't the way I'm going to do it. I'm sure I've got her where I want her anyway. If it's going to be a love match, you won't catch me barehanded, Mikhail Lukich."

Anna got up to her knees quickly and then backed away into the thicket. "Go away!" Her moist eyes blazed. "Why'd you come here? To disgrace me?"

"No. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"You're lying! "

"If I did, d'you think I'd care what you said? That wouldn't stop me." He sat crossed-legged on the ground with his elbows on his thighs and his head lowered. "All right. I'll go away." He rose. "Maybe we can meet someplace some time. You just say the word." He stood waiting for her reply.

Anna was silent. He walked off slowly.

"Wait," she whispered. He stopped and turned back. She spoke so softly it seemed it was the whisper of a breeze. "Sit down."

When he had returned and sat down again she sobbed as if someone were choking her and lurched towards him, falling onto his lap, trembling and crying,

"What a fool I am! I've no shame! "

Fyodor stroked her bony shoulders and smiled.

They sat in the thicket for nearly an hour without speaking. Fyodor kept stroking her back until she finally calmed down.

"I don't believe that you.... That you like me. Look how many girls there are, and pretty ones, too."

"Sure, there are. But you're the only one I want. Is there anything between you and Ivan? And what's going to happen now? I won't let anyone else have you."

"Who's Ivan? What's he to me? "

The moon had risen high in the sky when Fyodor finally recalled that Iniutin was waiting for him.

"I don't believe it, Anna."

"Believe what? "

"Everything that's going to happen. We'll just pet a while, and that'll be it. Your father'll never let you marry his hired man."

"I won't kill myself trying to get him to. If...."

This was not at all what Fyodor wanted to hear. "No, that's no way to do it. We're not heathens to get married without our parents' blessings."

"He'll bless us. He'll have to."

Now this was something else again.

* * *

Demian Iniutin grunted crossly at the sight of Fyodor. "I thought you weren't coming. The sun'll soon be up. Out messing around with the girls?"

"I'm young and healthy, and there's no law against it, is there?"

"He-he. That's right. Now I know a girl who's really a peach. Widow Nastasia's daughter."

"Anfisa?"

"Yep."

"She's still a kid."

"It's the green ones that taste the sweetest. Much better than the overripe ones. Or don't you know?"

"I never tried them." Fyodor sat down at the table.

"Why don't you?"

"I like that! Go ahead, if you want to."

"It's not a matter of wanting to. You've got to have a good wherewithal."

Fyodor put no store by their banter. Iniutin's wooden leg lay on the floor by the bed, as he hopped across the room on his crutches, over to where his jacket hung on the wall. He took his greasy wallet from the pocket and rummaged in it.

"Here," he said, tossing four ten-ruble bills onto the table. "It's found money."

"How come?" Fyodor stared blankly at the money. He shifted his gaze to the reddish stubble around Demian's mouth, then back to the money again. "How come so much?"

"That's for the job I got you out of the taiga for. It's a deposit. When you've done your job, you'll get another forty."

Fyodor's hand trembled as he reached for the money, but he pulled it back. He felt hot and cold in turn. "What d'you want me to do for it?" he asked hoarsely.

"You dumb or something? I told you. It's about Anfisa."

"What about her?" Fyodor stared at him in dismay.

"I said you've got to lay her. You really are dumb," Iniutin said, speaking calmly again as he sat down opposite Fyodor.

Fyodor began to rise dazedly. He leaned on the table for support, feeling something boiling up inside of him. "Are you crazy? She's still a kid." He was not afraid. He was enraged and disgusted by Iniutin.

"That kid has tits so big they're bursting out of her blouse."

"No matter. She's not even fourteen."

"Her ma said she'll be fifteen this fall."

"No matter. Wait till she grows up some. Then...."

"Not then. Now. Understand? Now! "

Iniutin's voice cracked. He sat down and thumped his crutch. "Sit down! I said sit down! " His small button-eyes flickered.

Fyodor's knees buckled as he sat down. He had broken out in a sweat.

"Stupid," Iniutin repeated, picked up the crumpled bills, came around to Fyodor's side in two hops and stuffed the money inside his shirt.

"Why do you think I'm keeping you in the village and paying you three rubles a month? "

"Not for this kind of business."

"That's right. That's why I'm paying you separate for this."

Fyodor stared at his feet in silence. Demian, too, was silent as he regarded Fyodor coldly. His lips had become a thin line.

"No, I won't. Let me off," Fyodor said softly.

Iniutin merely smiled. "There's no sense our being enemies, Fyodor. I'm more than a father to you. And if we don't see eye to eye and part our ways, what good'll come of it? What if I get mad at you some day and forget there are people standing around, and ask you what I'm paying you three rubles a month for if you aren't keeping up your end of the bargain? What then? "

A hot wave rose up inside of Fyodor again. The blood rushed to his face as if he really were about to burst into flame. He jumped up and strode towards Iniutin, holding his trembling hands out in front of him. "Then? Then I'll twist your scrawny neck till it snaps and yank your head off it."

"He-he-he." Iniutin's laughter was more like a bark.

"See how scared I am? "

Iniutin's laughter and jerking beard snuffed out the fire, disarming Fyodor. His hands fell to his sides.

"You sure scared me! All right, say you'll yank my head off. What'll it get you? I've had a long life and seen a lot in my time, but you'll go straight off to hard labor. Maybe you'll even see your brother Anton there."

Fyodor slumped onto his chair, realizing that there was no escaping the old man.

"While we're on the subject, you take this war. You're due to be called up any day now. What's so good about that? I've got to think of a way to get you off, since you're a fellow I want to keep near me. I've been sniffing around in the district center, but I still have to give it some more thought."

"What do you want me to do, rape her? If I do, the women'll kill me, and the old men'll bash my brains in sooner or later."

"God forbid! She's a silly girl, and she'll lie down quiet for you herself. I heard her talking about you to Kirian. There's one thing she doesn't like about you, though, and that's your moustache." Demian went on to recount the conversation he had overheard.

"The way I see it, you want me to do it to sour Kirian on Anfisa. Is that it?" Fyodor smiled feebly, like a doomed man.

"I like smart fellows."

"Who's the girl you want him to marry then? Hm? "

"Don't you worry your head about that."

Fyodor felt he was reeling when he left Iniutin's house.

It was a bright, moonlit night, with not a shred of cloud in sight, although the sky had been overcast but a few hours before. The bright stars gave forth a faint ringing, or perhaps it was his head that was ringing.

Entering his own yard, Fyodor went straight to the woodpile. He had bought two bottles of home-brew from one of the old village women the day before and had stuck one bottle away in the woodpile for further use. He extracted it, pulled out the rag stopper with his teeth, spat it out, threw back his head and closed his eyes as he drank straight from the bottle. Having drained half of it, he col-

lapsed onto to a pile of brushwood and lay there panting for a while. Then he polished off the remains and tossed the empty bottle away.

He lay there for quite some time, afraid to open his eyes, listening to the noises in his head while swirling green and black circles floated by his eyes, forming terrible whirlpools, as did the heavy water in the bottomless pools of the Gromotukha. If you tossed a chip into such a whirlpool it would be spun around and around to be either cast away to the edge of the pool and then caught up by a wave and carried downstream, or else be drawn into the very eye of the whirlpool and sucked down, disappearing into the cold, dark, mysterious depth. Fyodor suddenly felt he was that chip and that some great force had picked him up and was rushing him into the whirlpool.

He groaned, exerted all his will and forced his heavy lids open, but all he saw were the same spinning black and green circles, although now, with his eyes open, they gave off bright sparks. However, he still felt as if he were being pulled into the terrible whirlpool and he would come into contact with the water, where a relentless force would spin him around and around. He wondered whether he would finally be sucked into the black depths or whether he would be tossed out again.

Something seemed to melt inside his head as consciousness waned and he was overcome by torpid sleep.

* * *

The last days of 1941 were days of bitter frost in Shantara. In the beginning of January the thermometer rose slowly.

Anikei Yelizarov, the militiaman, was returning by the night freight from Klimkovo Village where a shop had been broken into. He was chilled to the bone, and the moment the train pulled into the station he dashed into the station house.

The small waiting room was practically deserted. A high round brick oven glowed in a corner of the room filling the air with a smell of coal gas. A girl in a ragged

summer coat was curled up fast asleep on the bench nearest to the stove. Her long dark hair had tumbled out from under her dirty shawl and nearly reached the floor. Her cheeks were rosy from the warmth. A small trickle of saliva gleamed in the corner of her mouth. She seemed to have been asleep for quite some time.

As soon as Yelizarov had warmed up he went over to the girl and touched her shoulder. It took her some time to awaken, but when she did she sat up quickly, fixed her hair and pressed herself into a corner of the bench, pulling the sides of her coat down to cover her torn stockings.

"Let's see your papers," he demanded.

"I don't have any. Everything was lost in the fire on the train."

"What train? Who are you? Where are you going? "

"I'm not going anyplace. Leave me alone! "

She was young and pretty and had large dark eyes that glimmered now from the tears that had welled up in them. She gave him a look that was full of hatred. "That's all I've been doing, explaining who I am and where I'm from. I told them in Novosibirsk. And then at some militia station. But nobody believes me. I tried to get a job, but they won't take me, because I have no papers."

Yelizarov blinked. He rubbed the side of his hand against his large nose that was still red from the cold. "Hm. Maybe I'll find you a job. Maybe I'll trust you and help you."

His words disarmed her. The hatred in her eyes died away. She suddenly began to sob, rubbing her tear-drenched cheeks with her fists like a child.

"Help me! Oh, please, help me! My name's Natasha Mironova.

My mother and I were being evacuated from Moscow. But on the second day our train was bombed. You can't imagine what it was like."

"So you're a refugee? "

"It was terrible! It...." Tears were choking her. "At one of the stops I got into the last car. It was full of old and sick people. But before I had a chance to get back to my own car, the train started moving. And then... Then...."

She stopped sobbing. Her eyes dried instantly. They reflected nothing, neither despair nor hatred. They were simply blank and cold, like two dead coals.

"That's when it happened. There was a terrible roar. And then I don't know what. Some more roaring and fire, and smoke. The earth rose up all around us. As soon as the planes were gone, I ran down the embankment to my car, to the one my mother and I were travelling in. It was right next to the locomotive. But there...." She sobbed again. Two or three women and a peasant man who had been sleeping on the other benches and had sat up were now glancing at Yelizarov anxiously.

"But there was nothing there. Just mangled rails and a huge hole. The other cars had been thrown off the rails. People were getting the passengers out of them. Some were alive and some had been killed. The locomotive was lying on its side and puffing. But our car was gone. It was the only passenger car in the whole train. Everybody'd envied us. And now it was gone. All that was left was a heap of black, burning iron. The iron was burning! "

"Good Lord! " one of the women mumbled.

"So your mother got killed. And where's your father? Fighting the Germans? " Yelizarov asked.

Something strange seemed to come over her again. She tossed her head, her mouth turned down scornfully, and a hostile flame flickered in her eyes. "I have no father," she said clearly.

"What's the matter? Is he dead? "

"Yes."

Yelizarov sized her up again. He buttoned his greatcoat. "All right. Come along. Yelizarov's a kind man. He'll think of something."

It was after midnight. A black icy sky hung over the station. Dim milky-white lights could be seen here and there through the cold fog. Every now and then a shunting engine tooted mournfully.

Yelizarov and Natasha crossed several sets of rails and headed towards Shantara.

"Who's Yelizarov? " she finally asked.

"Yelizarov? That's me."

* * *

Natasha did not immediately realize that Yelizarov had brought her to his house instead of taking her to the militia station. The woman who opened the door was short and fat. Her face was bloated from sleep. She had on a crumpled night gown that was short enough to reveal her red knees. The woman stared at Natasha. She looked frightened.

"She's an orphan. And a refugee," Yelizarov said, shortly. "This is my wife Nina."

"Why'd you bring her here?" the woman demanded angrily.

"I forgot to ask you for permission. She's got to be put up someplace. Nobody'll give her a job, because she hasn't got any papers."

"You seem to think it's my job to worry about others. Take off your coat."

"No. I'll be going. Or else take me to the militia station."

"You think you'll be better off there? Never mind. Take off your coat. Nina's as good-natured as I am." He practically pulled it off.

Once her coat was off, Natasha looked still more like a beggar. Her good woollen dress was creased, burnt at the hem in one spot and had a rip on the shoulder. Her shawl was dirty, her shoes were tattered, and the soles had come loose. Her stockings were torn.

"God Almighty! What garbage heap did you find her in?" his wife exclaimed. "She stinks to high heaven!"

"What if I do?" Natasha retorted. "I haven't had a bath since I left Moscow three months ago. Why'd you bring me here? Let me go!" She grabbed her coat and rushed towards the door, but it was locked.

"Don't worry, we'll let you out," Nina said more amiably and went over to the door, but did not unlock it. Once again she sized the girl up. Natasha suddenly went limp. She was so weak she felt faint, and in order not to fall she leaned against the wall, indifferent to all that might follow. She saw Yelizarov's wife setting the table, then rummaging about in a chest of drawers and pulling some things out.

"You go ahead and have supper," the woman said to her husband. "We're going next door. The neighbors heated their bathhouse today, and maybe there's still some hot water left."

An hour later Natasha was back in the house again. She was seated at the table, drinking scalding tea. She felt dizzy again, but this time it was the cleanliness of her own body that caused it. Her cheeks were rosy. It was the first time in many days that she had eaten her fill and had warmed up. Her one desire now was to go to sleep and sleep, and sleep. However, her hosts had not offered her a bed. They both sat opposite in silence, staring hard at her as they might at some object they were going to buy. Yelizarov's eyes had become bleary from the water glass of vodka he had downed. His wife sighed from time to time.

"Let them stare at me. Just as long as they don't chase me out into the cold," Natasha was thinking.

"Now go ahead and tell us all about it," Yelizarov said when she had finished her tea.

"What?" she sat up with a start. "But I've told you all there is to tell."

"Don't lie. You can't fool Yelizarov. Why won't anyone give you a job?"

"I told you. All my papers were lost in the fire."

"My dear girl," he said and laughed as he rose, "so far they don't let people die of starvation in our country. There must be a reason." His face became stern. He spoke sharply now, "Was anyone in your family sentenced as an enemy of the people?"

Natasha rose swiftly. The roses in her cheeks faded.

"Who is it? Your father?" His voice rang.

"Yes! My father!" She burst into tears.

"I guessed as much back at the station." He rubbed his hands.

"But he's not guilty. He's not guilty at all!" she sobbed, raising her tear-stained face that had become ugly.

"That's of no importance."

It was as if she had been struck full-force. "What? Why not?" she said in a whisper.

Yelizarov yawned. He did not even bother to reply as he left the kitchen. Nina was frowning as she stacked the

plates. "You can help with the dishes," she said crossly. "We'll figure out what to do about you in the morning. And you can sleep on the oven ledge."

The next day was a Sunday, but Yelizarov went off to work as usual while it was still dark outside. His wife spoke to Natasha in the same cross voice,

"My husband and me talked it over, and this is what we decided. You can live here with us and keep house for us. And make sure everything's tidy. We're away at work all day. Anikei's at the militia station and I'm a cook at the nursery school. The house is small, just the one room and the kitchen, and we don't have any children. Don't expect any pay. You won't even be earning your keep and the clothes I've given you as it is. After a while Anikei'll get you some new papers."

The dishevelled, unkempt woman disgusted Natasha. She gritted her teeth as she listened to what the woman was saying.

"You mean you're taking me on as a maid?"

"You can thank your lucky stars I am. Keeping you here'll be like keeping a firebrand in a haystack, because Anikei's an old goat when it comes to women."

"What?" Natasha did not really understand, but sensed what the woman meant. She felt her blood run cold.

"Just what I said. I'm telling you outright, woman to woman, that sooner or later Anikei'll try to get into bed with you. And I've no mind to share him. So if anything happens, I'll scratch your eyes out. I'm just warning you."

"I'll.... I'm leaving right now!"

"Go ahead." Nina waved a plump hand. "Nobody's forcing you to stay. But where'll you go? Have a look at the frost outside." She nodded at the ice-covered panes.

Natasha had no place to go. At any rate, she did not know of a place she could go. She sank down onto a chair and buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook.

"That's no way to be," Nina said and, to Natasha's amazement, patted her head. "You might as well agree and stay on here. As for Anikei, he won't bother you if you don't give him any encouragement. He's as lecherous as a tomcat, but as cowardly as a hare. You keep that in mind.

If he gets fresh you just slap his face hard. And tell me about it. Or you can say you'll complain to his chief at the station. He'll drop you like a hot potato then. He's keen about keeping his job, because he's scared to death of being called up. So you might as well agree."

"Why do you need my consent?" Natasha shouted. "You know I've no place to go! But I want you to know that I hate you! I despise you! "

"Fine. That's just fine," Nina said unexpectedly. "That means I won't have to worry about you and Anikei."

* * *

Natasha had been living with the Yelizarovs for a week and in all that time she had not uttered more than a few dozen words. She quickly understood her duties and would get up early to make the stove and prepare breakfast. After the Yelizarovs left for work she would scrub the floors, wash clothes and, towards evening, would make the stove again and prepare supper.

At night, as she lay on her bed high up on the warm, cozy brick oven, she would listen to them snoring in the next room and wonder what she would do in spring when warm weather set in. Although she had no clear idea of what she would do, she did know she would not remain with them. With each passing day Anikei with his blue sheep's eyes of which he was so very proud, was becoming more and more loathsome to her, and this went twice for his wife. Every evening Nina would come home carrying a shopping bag full of food, and peer at Natasha suspiciously, blinking her puffy lids as if to ask whether she and Anikei had not been up to something in her absence. "You thief! " Natasha thought hatefully. "You've stolen all that food from the nursery. You're stealing food from babies."

Sometimes, in despair, she wondered why there weren't any kind, intelligent people left on earth to understand the predicament she was in and trust her, someone who would believe her father was innocent, someone who would help her get a job.

She might work in the nursery Nina did, for instance.

Oh, how hard she would work! And what tasty food she would cook for the children. And she would never steal a crumb. Then again, perhaps she should conceal the truth about her father and change her name. Or she might go off to some wilderness deep in the taiga in the spring, to some remote collective farm, invent a story about her past and settle there as best she could. Each time such thoughts occurred to her she would cast them aside angrily. "No, I'm proud of Papa, no matter what! I'll never lie about him being my father."

Yelizarov paid no attention to her. Once, however, he asked her how much schooling she'd had.

"I graduated from secondary school."

"Ah, so you're educated," he drawled.

The fear Nina had instilled in her was gradually dispelled. Besides, Yelizarov never returned from work before midnight, when his wife was already snoring away.

One day, however, he returned around six o'clock, dead drunk. He took off his fur hat and coat, sat down on the chest in the kitchen, placing his feet far apart, and said, "Nina home yet? "

"No."

"Fine. Gimme some supper. I saw a buddy off to war. There was a helluva lot to drink, but hardly any food."

Natasha was alerted by his early return and his being so drunk, but after he had asked her for something to eat she calmed down, although she was still on her guard. She took the hot food she had prepared for supper from the oven. He rose and repeated,

"That's fine. We don't want her around." And he grabbed at her like an animal.

"Let go! Let me go! " She began pummeling his face, but this only made him snort and exhale his sour breath in her face as he tried to force her down onto the floor. "I'll ... go to your chief at the militia! " she cried, recalling Nina's advice.

Nina, however, had either overestimated the effect of such a threat, or else Yelizarov was beyond understanding. He did not drop her like a hot potato, but panted hoarsely. As they struggled, Natasha grabbed the edge of the table for support and felt a fork under her hand. She jabbed it

into his hateful repugnant face without a moment's hesitation.

"Owww! " he howled, fell to his knees and clapped his hands to his cheek.

She stood petrified for a moment and watched him writhe. Blood trickled between his fingers. "God! What if I'd jabbed it in his eye or his throat?" She grabbed her coat and shawl and dashed outside.

"Stop! Stop! " he yelled, scrambling to his feet. He chased her through the house and across the yard, and even out onto the street, where he finally came to his senses and stopped. "You won't get away! You'll come back! You've no place to go! " he shouted after her.

Natasha ran on for quite some time. She was completely out of breath when she finally stopped running. The street was dark and deserted, lined by silent, frost-covered trees. She leaned against a frozen tree trunk and wept.

These were probably the last tears stored inside her, for they soon ended, carrying off the last of whatever hope still remained in her heart that her life was not ended and that some day it would begin anew. They also carried off her hatred for Yelizarov, for his fat wife and all the people who had not cared to understand or help her. Her heart was as cold and indifferent to everything now as the moon up above.

Staring up at the dull yellow disc, she continued down the street and soon found herself outside the village. She neither knew nor cared where she was going. The biting frost had long since chilled her to the bone. Her hands, her head covered but by a thin shawl, and her feet shod in torn shoes were all frozen. "You'll freeze to death," someone seemed to whisper in her ear. "So what?" she replied to that someone. "Go back to the Yelizarovs and try to hang on till spring. Something'll turn up when it gets warmer." "No! Never!" she replied. "Then knock at any door and ask them to let you in for the night. After all, there are people living in those houses, not wild beasts." "I don't want to!" "Your whole life's ahead of you. You haven't really lived yet. If you freeze to death now it'll be the end." "So what? I'll be glad! "

Indeed, she suddenly began to feel warm and even

cozy. She looked around. There were high bushes to the side of the road and low hills covered with emerald and golden dust. The moon hung above them. It was large and round, and friendly.

Natasha felt like lying down on a snowdrift and going to sleep.

* * *

On a late January evening in 1942 three men sat at the table in Manya Ogorodnikova's cottage. They were Makar Kaftanov, Lenny Gvozdev, who had escaped from prison with him, and a tall, thin man with a pale scar on his cheek and tired, cat-keen eyes. He was Pyotr Zubov, the son of Colonel Zubov who had pursued Kruzhilin's partisan detachment back in 1919. In November of 1941 the nazis had released him from prison in Kursk and had offered him a job with the local police in Kursk. He had agreed to take it, but had pleaded sick and asked for vacation before beginning his new duties. He had spent those weeks in the city, enjoying his freedom, and then had suddenly disappeared to show up in Shantara on New Year's Eve, when he had knocked at the door of Lusha Kashkarova's house. At first, she had pretended not to recognize him. Then she said that she had had no word of her good-for-nothing footloose foster son Makar Kaftanov in ages. Finally, having made sure that no one was tailing Zubov, she gave him Manya Ogorodnikova's address.

Zubov would not reply to Makar's question as to how he had gotten out of prison or why he had come to Shantara. He was dour and silent, spending his days on his bed, reading whatever books he found in Manya's house or listening to the radio with his eyes shut. Once only did he ask Makar, "What's at the Ognev Springs where your retreat used to be?"

"Nothing. The last of the burned logs are rotting away. Everything's covered with weeds. Why d'you want to know?"

"That's where my father was killed."

"Ah! You mean you're nostalgic about the place?"

Did you ever find the fellow who sent your father to heaven? ”

Zubov, as was his wont, said nothing.

Now the three of them were playing blackjack. There was a small pile of crumpled bills on the table and two half-empty bottles of vodka. The windows were tightly shuttered and heavily curtained from within. Manya was lying curled up on the bed with her face to the wall.

Makar was the dealer. As he dealt each hand he crooned, “There once was a girl named Ma-nya-a-a.”

“And she had a wicked knife,” Gvozdev joined in the song. “Gimme another card. One more.”

“Good Lord! I’m bored to death! ” Manya said as she sat up and swung her feet over the side of the bed.

“People get bored when their brains turn to jelly. Or when they lose at cards,” Gvozdev mused. “Manya had a real smart head.... Gimme another card. She stripped before she went to bed. Twenty-one! ”

“Damn! ” Makar slammed the deck on the table.

“That’s what I call a bit of lousy luck. He-he.” Gvozdev scooped up the bills. “How about another hand? ”

Zubov poured himself a drink, downed it and rose. There was a poster on the wall that read: “What have you done for the fighting men today? ” He went over to it and examined it closely, singing the prison song absently as he did.

“Stop howling! It makes me sick,” Manya said.

“Gimme the deck! ” Makar yelled. “I’m putting Manya in the kitty! Let’s see your money! ”

Gvozdev turned out his pockets readily.

“Makar! Makar! ” Manya pleaded and rushed over to him.

“Shut up! Don’t talk to me when I’m playing! ” he said and shoved her away. Then he dealt a hand nonchalantly, still humming the song. “She got a big knife in her back.... What another? The one who had a tricky knife.... One more? ”

“Your turn.”

“And her curvy body,” Makar took a card cautiously, “floated on the waves. Show! ”

“Tough luck. I’ve got twenty! ” Gvozdev rose. “Ah,

Manya! I was usually lucky at cards or at love, but today I'm lucky at both. Let's give love a try. What do you say? Let me escort you to our marriage bed. It'll help cure your boredom."

"No! Oh, no! " she backed away. "I can't."

"Why not? "

"Because I'm sick of all this! Of this house, and your songs, and you, too! "

"You don't say? " Gvozdev laughed nervously. "But a bargain's a bargain. Go on! " and he prodded her towards the door.

"I'll get you a girl if that's what you need. Right now."

Pyotr Zubov, who had long since lost interest in the poster and had downed another glass of vodka, and was about to pour himself another, looked up at her. "What girl? Where's she from? Wait a minute, Lenny."

"She's an orphan. A refugee. A young kid I found half-dead in a snowdrift a few days ago. I asked my neighbor, Granny Akulina, to look after her."

"Bring her in. We'll see what she's like."

Manya left. Makar looked after her in annoyance.

There was much that displeased Makar. He was annoyed by the fact that Lenny Gvozdev had turned out to be a stupid, narrow-minded fop who was still awed by the fact that he was an underworld character, and Makar knew from experience that you couldn't rely on such a man, because he'd chicken out at the drop of a hat. He was displeased by the fact that Pyotr Zubov had shown up in Shantara. Naturally, they were friends and practically foster brothers. All during the Civil War and for some years after Pyotr Zubov, Lusha Kashkarova, whom both of them called "Ma", and he had lived in plenty in a remote log cabin in the taiga. Afterwards they had known both hunger and want. When Zubov was eighteen, which must have been in '25, he had robbed a shop in some village, been apprehended and sentenced to jail. Several years later Makar had followed in his footsteps.

The two of them had met after a separation of many years in a prison camp in '36. By then Pyotr Zubov was a die-hard criminal serving a sentence of forty-two years. That was when Makar had told him that Lusha, their foster

mother, had moved to Shantara. He had given Zubov the address, never dreaming that he would one day make use of it. But here was Zubov now, and he was behaving strangely.

There was also Manya to worry about. What if she suddenly decided to hand them over to the authorities? Or that kid Vitya, Ma Lusha's own son? Makar had tried hard to make the boy his flunky but had failed. He had only succeeded in raising the hackles on Vitya's neck and making him glower like a little animal. Besides, one day when Makar had wanted to take Vitya along to Klimkovo, Ma Lusha had suddenly said, "Leave him be, son. Don't ruin his chances. You can see he don't want to go with you. He's not made out for that kind of a life." But they needed Vitya badly.

Klimkovo was a sleepy little village with a shop set up in a shack. The fat clerk would lock up at night by slipping an iron bolt through the hasps on the inside of the shutters of the only window. Then she'd lock the door and hang a padlock on it for good measure. The small entrance was piled high with empty crates and barrels. Makar had realized that if they concealed Vitya under one of the crates in the evening he could enter the shop after the woman had locked up for the night, and open the shutters. The rest would be child's play. But Vitya had flatly refused. After his last escape from prison Makar had not yet been able to get himself a string of passkeys and so he and Gvozdev had had to spend too much time sawing through the bolt.

Neither Ma Lusha nor Vitya presented a threat to him as yet, nor did Manya, actually. It was Zubov and the drinking bouts he had instigated every evening that worried him. Manya was becoming restless. Now she was going to bring another girl in. What were they going to do with her later? How'd they be able to get rid of her? Besides, Makar sensed that the militia had a pretty good idea of who had broken into the shop in Klimkovo and were looking for him. He'd have to get out before it was too late.

Makar was planning to escape from Shantara before the next day dawned. That was why he had lost Manya at

cards. Gvozdev would be asleep with her and Zubov would be drunk, as usual. Makar would steal the German gun from under Zubov's pillow, for he did not have one, and it might come in handy. That would be the last they'd ever see of him. However, when Manya left the house some sixth sense told him to run right then and there, and not wait until dawn, all the more so since the loot from the shop in Klimkovo was not stashed away here, as always, but in a safer place. In an hour or two it might be too late. He was surprised that Manya had shown such faithfulness and then decided he'd have to do without Zubov's gun. If they ever met up again, and it was a small world, as Makar knew only too well, Zubov would get even with him.

He pulled his sheepskin coat off the peg and clamped on his fur hat.

"Where're you going?" Zubov demanded. He had been drinking more than usual but was not getting drunk for some reason or other.

"To the can," Makar said casually. "Don't want to fill up the slop pail at night."

"Manya's locked the door," Zubov smiled. "You'll just have to wait."

Whenever Manya went off to work or left the house she always locked them in. Makar had overlooked this fact in his excitement.

"Damn. All right, I'll wait." He shrugged off his coat and set another bottle on the table. "Go on, drink up. My pa was a great one for vodka." He went on to spin a tale. "You never knew my old man, Lenny, but Pyotr here should remember him. Do you? He had a shop here in Shantara before. It was called 'Kaftanov and Sons'. My old man was Kaftanov, and me and my brother Zinovy were the sons. Yakov Aleinikov, a local NKVD man, snared him. They shot him later. Mmm.... That was a long time ago. Remember my old man?" All the while Makar was speaking his brain was working feverishly: "What the hell? Did he guess I'm going to fly the coop?"

"I never liked fat-bellied shopkeepers," Zubov said and turned on the radio.

The announcer was reading a Note of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the USSR "On the

general plundering and destruction of the population and the atrocities committed by the German authorities on occupied Soviet territory”.

Zubov sat there listening with his arms crossed on his chest and the strange, dull gleam in his eyes that had always frightened Makar. “I remember your old man, Makar,” he said unexpectedly. “He had a red beard. And I remember your brother Zinovy. He was one-eyed, wasn’t he?”

“No. He had both his eyes. There was a cataract on one, though,” Makar replied and he sounded offended.

“I’ve never forgotten your father’s aide, Ivan either. After all, he saved my life.” He spun on Makar. “You kept trying to knife him back in the camp, didn’t you?”

“And I will, too, if I get the chance. I’ll get even with him for my pa. They say he’s close by here in Mikhailovka.”

“You’re a regular mountaineer, aren’t you?” Zubov said and smiled. “I lived in the Caucasus for a while and blood feuds are all the rage there.”

“Aren’t you looking for your father’s killer, too?”

“Yes, I am too!” Zubov turned livid from a rage that seemed inexplicable to Makar. He turned his head away and continued in a lower tone of voice, “A garter snake’s like a viper, too. It’s got teeth, but it hasn’t got any poison.”

When Ivan Savelyev had shown up in the prison camp, Makar Kaftanov had even turned pale from joy, but Zubov had forbidden him to lay a finger on Ivan. Makar did not dare disobey him, and so had to limit his pleasure to warning Ivan about the fate that awaited him. Ivan got so scared he had himself put in the jug, fool that he was. No jail would have saved him from Makar’s vengeance, if not for Zubov. To this day Ivan Savelyev did not know that he was still alive because of Zubov’s intercession.

“I told you to leave Ivan alone,” Zubov said softly. “And that means for always!”

“So.” Makar’s teeth chattered on his glass of vodka. “You come here because you were so worried about him?”

“Yes. That and curiosity. I’d like to have a look at

Kruzhilin, the partisan leader who fought my father. And at somebody called Yakov Aleinikov, that NKVD man, who led the partisans to my father at Ognev Springs. And at Ivan's brother Fyodor. He was the one who actually killed my father."

"Fyodor? Who told you that? How'd you find out? "

"Remember Yerofei Ogorodnikov, Manya's father? The one who tried to escape from camp and was stopped by the dogs? He settled down here for a reason, and he dug up some information at my request."

"So that's it! "

Gvozdev was listening closely, trying to understand what it was all about and attempting to look as though he did, although he could not make head or tail of their conversation.

"And what now, after you've found out? And what do you mean by having teeth and no poison? "

"What now? " Zubov felt silent.

Meanwhile, Makar was thinking, "He's keeping something up his sleeve. I'll be damned if I know what's on his mind. Well, there's only one thing for me to do and that's to get out of here as fast as I can."

In the ensuing silence the voice of the announcer, a woman now, was describing the atrocities committed by the nazis in occupied Kiev, noting the number of inhabitants that had been hanged and shot.

"I was in jail in Kiev, too. They've got a good jail there," Zubov said.

"All jails are good. They're good and strong," Gvozdev spoke up.

The outside lock turned. There were steps in the cold pantry and then Manya entered, pulling Natasha along. "Don't worry, they won't eat you. They're nice," Manya was saying.

"Wow! " Gvozdev exclaimed. His eyes popped. "This is some exchange! Want a candy? " he asked and rose.

"Sit down! " Zubov snapped. His heavy hand forced Gvozdev back down. Then he looked at the girl.

Natasha had on her old dress but a new pair of felt boots and new warm stockings. Her eyes shifted fearfully from one to the other of the men in the room. When they

finally met Zubov's she flinched.

"You tell me something, Gvozdev," Zubov said slowly, never taking his eyes from Natasha. "Tell me this: are you a Russian?"

"Uh-huh," Gvozdev nodded and was about to get up again, but Zubov held him down once more, at which he shouted, "Yes! I'm a Russian! What do you want me to do, fill out a questionnaire? I was born in '23, was sentenced once and escaped from prison."

At this Natasha backed away to the door.

"Wait! " Manya muttered. She turned to Gvozdev and said, "What're you yapping about? What do you want to do, scare her? He's a great joker. Don't pay any attention to him."

Zubov rose, turned off the radio and sat down again. "I saw the Germans hang people in Kursk."

"So what? They've taken a lot of cities, and they hang people in all of them. They'll take a lot more, too. What's it to us?" Gvozdev said.

"Depending on who you mean. I can only thank them for letting me out when I had a sentence of fifty years to buck. Half a century, that is. I'd have died in jail. But I can't understand you, Gvozdev." Zubov's fist came crashing down on the table. "I can't understand you!" he repeated.

"What's the matter? You crazy or something?" Gvozdev said, jumping up like a jack-in-the-box. "Why don't you go lie down, huh?"

"Yes. I'm drunk. I'll go lie down," Zubov agreed, going limp as suddenly as he had become enraged. He rose heavily and went over to Natasha. "Who are you?"

She stood by the wall, as pale as a ghost and more dead than alive. It seemed that the slightest touch would make her topple over.

"Nobody," she whispered.

"Who were your parents?"

"Nobody.... I don't know."

"Her father's an enemy of the people," Manya volunteered. "She said he was arrested in '36. He was a big man in Moscow. I guess he got a hankering for the easy life and sold out."

"That's a lie! " Natasha cried.

"And her mother got killed on the way here when their train was bombed."

"I saw them bombing, too," Zubov said thoughtfully. "Were you scared? "

"I don't know. It was worse later. It was cold and dark, and there were the thugs."

"What cold? What thugs? "

"She didn't have any place to stay. I told you I found her in a snowdrift," Manya explained.

"Please let me go," Natasha said. She fell to her knees in front of Zubov. "Manya! Oh, please! Have pity on me! "

"Stop it! " Gvozdev said and went over to her. "I won't let anybody hurt you. And I'll be like a daddy to you. Though they might slap me in jail, too."

"That's right, stop crying," Zubov said. "Go on back home. Let her out."

"You've no right to do that! I won her! "

"You won Manya."

"It was a fair exchange."

"There won't be any! " Zubov thundered. Then seeing that Gvozdev had stuck his hand into his pocket, he said, "What do you think you're doing? Get your hand out where I can see it or I'll break it off! " Then he leaned over Natasha. "Get up."

Taking advantage of the commotion, Makar had put on his coat and slipped out into the kitchen. He threw the bolt and went out onto the porch. They heard him scream, "It's a raid! A ra...."

His voice was cut off. Zubov looked up sharply. Gvozdev blanched and pulled out a knife. At that very moment two armed militiamen burst into the room. Yelizarov bellowed, waving his gun,

"Hands up! And quiet, everybody! I don't want any funny business! Ah, that you, Gvozdev? Get his knife, Sarapulov."

Despite Yelizarov's menacing appearance and shouting, Zubov turned his back on him, went over to the table, sat down, poured himself a glass of vodka and drank it.

"You! Get up! " Yelizarov sputtered.

"Stop shouting." Then, still disregarding the jerking barrel of Yelizarov's gun in his face, Zubov pulled his own gun from his pocket and tossed it on the table.

"What're you doing? There's only two of them," Gvozdev moaned.

But there were four militiamen. At that moment the two others led Makar Kaftanov in from the kitchen and sat him down beside Zubov. Then they told Gvozdev, Natasha and Manya Ogorodnikova to sit down at the table, too.

"Search the place! Don't miss anything!" Yelizarov ordered. Then, as Semyon Savelyev entered from the street, he shouted, "Get out of here! Didn't you hear me the first time? What do you want?"

"I want to watch," Semyon replied. "What's the matter? Is it against the law?"

"Yes! There's nothing to watch." However, Yelizarov was overjoyed and excited at his windfall and forgot all about Semyon a moment later. He turned to the group at the table, all now under arrest, and said, "Well, hello. I thought there was only Makar, but look at how many friends he's got here! I said hello, Kaftanov. And you, Gvozdev. Don't you recognize me?"

"Yes," Gvozdev muttered. "I see you've been promoted. Why'd you change your job?"

"My country called me. A Communist's bound to be where it's hardest."

"Are you a Communist? I'd never have guessed."

"I am. Even though I'm not a Party member. But they'll let me join now. I've been promoted to sergeant on account of you, Makar. See my insignia? Now I'll be up for another promotion. They may even enroll me in some courses. Then I'll really be set! Who are you?" he asked, addressing Zubov. "Keeping your mouth shut, are you? Don't worry, we'll soon find out. How come you're so tight-lipped, Makar? I really got you this time, didn't I? You burgled the shop in Klimovka, didn't you? I guessed right away, and I knew that once you showed up hereabouts, you'd be sure to hang around for a while, only you'd be lying low. So I kept my eyes open and sniffed around. And then this girl...." Yelizarov rattled on and on as he strutted up and down, gun in hand.

Semyon Savelyev was there quite by chance. He had had no time off during the previous month and now had finally been given two days off. Coming home from the plant that evening, he had refused supper but had taken his skis and gone skiing on the hills beyond the village in the moonlight, breathing in the cold, fresh air greedily, enjoying the silence and the feeling of being alone with nature. As he was returning, he spotted four militiamen in a huddled conference outside Manya Ogorodnikova's cottage.

"What's up? Catching some thieves?" he had asked.

"Yes," Yelizarov had hissed. "Go on, get lost! "

"Need any help? "

"I said get lost! And don't make so much noise! "

Semyon had indeed intended to go on, but had looked back to see the men entering Manya's yard. He was curious, and when he heard someone shout: "It's a raid! " he had turned and hurried back.

Now he was staring in wonder at Makar, Lenny Gvozdev and Manya, whom he was amazed to see with them, at the thin stranger with a scar on his face, and a girl in a light coat whose eyes, he saw, were terror-stricken. He glanced at her with hostility and said to himself, "She's still a kid, but she's right in there with them." He noted how pretty she was. "Too bad she's ruined her life. She'll be going from one jail to another now." He experienced a strange and mingled feeling of disgust and compassion for her.

"And just then this girl turned up, meaning Natasha Mironova here," Yelizarov continued. ("What a good name," Semyon said to himself.) "And then I saw Granny Akulina buying a pair of lady's felt boots, 'What d'you want them for, old woman?' I says, and she says, 'God's given me a daughter. And Manya Ogorodnikova gave me the money for them.' 'What daughter's that?' I says. Anyway, she told me about Manya finding the girl in a snowdrift and then bringing her to her house. So I says to myself: and why didn't Manya take her in? You live here all alone, don't you? This is why you didn't! Things that look hard are really easy close up. So I started keeping an eye on this place, but everything looked all right. So I decided to come around and have a closer look. And here

we are! I no sooner get my foot on the porch than Makar here falls into my arms."

Yelizarov was bubbling over from joy. All those present save Semyon understood what he was talking about. Semyon, however, was staring at Natasha in undisguised amazement.

"Why, you're as good as Sherlock Holmes," Zubov said and smiled wryly.

"Which homes are those?" Yelizarov demanded. His eloquence seemed to have suddenly run dry. "I don't want any talking here!" he snapped.

The search was completed but did not produce anything besides the eight hundred rubles they found in the men's pockets.

"Well, they've either stashed it away someplace else or sold the stuff," Yelizarov concluded, calling it a day. "They'll confess. Let's go. Tie the men's hands, just in case. Now, I'm warning you: I want everything to be nice and peaceful! Yelizarov'll calm you down real quick otherwise. Get up one at a time and keep your hands behind your backs. You, there, who were talking about those homes. You first. Let's have your hands."

"I can see you're not taking any chances," Zubov said and smiled sarcastically again as he held out his hands.

"Let's go," Yelizarov ordered after the men had been bound.

"I won't go! I don't want to!" Natasha cried. "I've nothing to do with this. I never saw any of them before in my life. I just came here. She made me come. She said she wanted me to come and visit her and her friends."

"You'll tell us all about it at the station," Yelizarov said with a sneer. "We'll just take down the particulars and let you go. Now what?" he shouted, seeing that Zubov had suddenly stopped beside her.

"I'll tell you something," Zubov said to Natasha, ignoring Yelizarov. "Remember this: a person should never get down on his knees. If he does, he's not a person any more. Understand?"

"No," she shook her head.

"You will some day. Just remember what I said. Goodbye. I don't think we'll ever meet again."

* * *

Semyon Savelyev tagged along behind the militiamen and their prisoners as far as the station, though he knew not why. He kept thinking about the girl named Natasha Mironova. Who was she? Was she really innocent? Where was she from? How did she happen to be in Shantara?

As Makar was leaving the house, he had stopped by Semyon to say in a low and menacing voice, "So long, proletarian nephew. Say hello to my sister Anna for me. Tell her her little brother hadn't forgotten her." Then, turning to the tall, thin man, he added, "You probably won't get a chance to see Fyodor, so you might as well have a look at his son here."

Zubov did look at Semyon. The eyes beneath his knitted brows were curious and unpleasant.

"Why does he want to see Pa?" Semyon wondered. "Who is he? He looks like a bandit."

The thaw that had set in some days before seemed to be over, for the snow was getting hard and crusty. It creaked loudly underfoot. White stars sailed softly above. The cold crept under Semyon's ski jacket and heavy sweater.

Natasha was somewhere in the middle of the group. She had tucked her hands high up into her tattered sleeves. Every now and then Semyon would get a glimpse of her lowered head, the plaid shawl that was tied in the fashion of old women and her sharp shoulders. She kept staring at the ground, as if she was afraid of stumbling. "She'll look around now," Semyon said to himself. When they finally reached the long, barracks-like militia station she did turn, a moment before disappearing into the building. She stopped on the porch and turned around. He could see her eyes in the moonlight. Her expression was one of hopelessness, hurt and pleading.

A few minutes later Semyon was knocking on Granny Akulina's crooked door.

"Wait a sec, dearie. I'm coming," he heard her say through her wheezing and coughing as she rattled the wooden bolt. "I've been up all this time. Couldn't sleep for worrying. Who're Manya's visitors?"

When she finally realized that she was not talking to Natasha she seemed merely surprised, but not frightened. "Hm. Who are you? What do you want?"

Semyon told her his name. "Ah, Fyodor's older boy, are you?" she mumbled and went back into the house.

After he had told her of what had happened, she chewed at her cheeks and said, "Oh, dear. So that's it. I was wondering what sort of visitors Manya had in the middle of the night. Then again, they're young, and I thought they just wanted to have a party. But that's what it is. Oh, dear. What's going to happen now?"

"Who's the girl?" he asked, coming straight to the point.

"She's an orphan. One of them refugees. Manya brought her here. She found her in a snowdrift and told me to look after her, seeing as she was nearly dead. Manya said she was on the night shift and didn't have time for the girl, but that we'd find out who she was later. I was happy she'd brought her. I get lonely here, with just me and the crickets in the hearth. I had a whole family put in with me, but they've moved. The plant got them an apartment to themselves. I kept thinking I'd go to the main office to tell them they could put in another family now. That's when Manya brought that poor child in. She didn't speak a word for two whole days, just kept on crying, and then she started scolding Manya and me for keeping her alive when she wanted to die out there in the snow."

"Why'd she want to die?"

The old woman recounted whatever she knew about the girl from what Natasha had told her. When Semyon finally left her cottage she saw him out, mumbling, "Dear me! What's going to happen now?"

Since Semyon's parents were apparently ignorant of Makar Kaftanov's presence in Shantara he said nothing to them. The relationship between his parents was strained to the utmost. They existed under the same roof as strangers, never exchanging more than a few words in the course of a week. Besides, Semyon knew exactly what their reaction would be to the news: his mother would blanch and cringe inwardly, while his father's bristly mouth would turn down in a scowl, and he'd say something like, "When

will somebody crack that bandit's skull?" His words would slash across Anna's taut nerves, making her cry out in pain, but not so that they would hear. She would cry out soundlessly, with her eyes alone, but that was still more frightening. Thus, he said nothing.

After supper Semyon took a book and went to bed, but could not concentrate. He kept seeing the girl with the large dark eyes who had been so helpless and terrified. He kept hearing her shout, "I won't go! I'm innocent!" If this was so, and if what Granny Akulina had told him was so, what would become of the girl? Then again, how could it be that no one would give her a job? So what if her father had been arrested? Maybe he was to blame. Was she to perish for nothing?

He kept tossing in his bed that night, unable to sleep. Finally, towards dawn, he understood what he must do. The solution was so simple and so logical he wondered why he had not thought of it sooner. He called himself a stupid ass, turned his face into his pillow and was asleep in an instant.

* * *

A blue winter dawn was breaking slowly and sluggishly over Shantara when Natasha Mironova closed the padded door of the militia station, gulped a mouthful of cold air and hurried off. After a while she sat down on a frozen bench beneath a hoarfrost-laced tree and was overcome by unhappy thoughts.

When she had heard the bandit Zub say that a person should never drop to his knees, because if he was on his knees he was no longer a human being, this had at first seemed stupid to her, but as time passed she found herself recalling this more and more often, until now it was all she could think of. Indeed, there was a deeper meaning to his words, a hidden power which she could as yet not fathom. She recalled as in a haze her conversation with the militiaman and could not remember what he had asked her about or what her answers had been.

Thinking about all this now, Natasha did not notice

Yelizarov until he was beside her. She jumped up, but did not run off. Instead, she sized him up with loathing.

"Well? Are you satisfied now? Come on home."

"What about the paper I signed saying I'd leave Shantara in twenty-four hours?"

"I just wanted to teach you a lesson, so's you wouldn't be so high and mighty. Don't worry. I made you sign it, and I can tear it up if you come back. It'll be easy. As far as you know what, I'm sorry. I was drunk. It'll never happen again. Honest. We'll get you a salary. Just think: where can you go now? It's the dead of winter. You'll freeze to death."

"Maybe you're the one who's right, and not that bandit?" she mused. "Maybe I should fall to my knees and wait it out for now? Wait it out on my knees and then get up?"

"That's it!" Yelizarov exclaimed. "Seeing which way the wind blows, as they say. You won't find anything as safe and snug as my place. You'll be grateful to me some day, wait and see."

"Oh, you wretch! You miserable wretch!"

"Fair enough. It's like this then: if you're not out of Shantara by tomorrow morning, you can blame yourself," he hissed and stalked off.

She sat down on the bench again and began to think of what she was to do. She could stay on at Granny Akulina's till evening, for she was a kind old woman. She could even live there for a week if she stayed indoors. Nobody would ever find out. But then what? After all, the old woman had a very small pension. She couldn't support Natasha forever. Besides, Yelizarov was sure to come by the very next morning to see if she was still there. What was she to do? What was she to do?

The gray gloom of early morning was drifting away, revealing more and more of the street. Natasha still sat on the bench, staring straight ahead unseeingly. People were beginning to pass, glancing at her in wonder, and she realized she had to get up and go somewhere, but did not budge. She wanted to weep, to wail loudly in despair like an animal, so that everyone would hear, so that passers-by would stop to at least ask her what was wrong and why she

was sitting there on such a freezing day. Perhaps even that boy in the leather jacket with the collar turned up.

However, when he first ran by and then, as if somehow guessing her thoughts, turned back, stopped in front of her and said cheerfully, "Hello, there!" she drew back in fright as if he had the plague.

"Go away. Don't bother me."

"What if we hold a press conference first?" he continued, undaunted, and his green eyes sized her up. "I still have a few minutes to spare. That should be enough for a first acquaintance. My name's Yura. But you can call me Yuri, or anything else you like. What's yours?"

He spoke rapidly, and he was funny, but he didn't make her smile.

"Please leave me alone," she said, feeling that her head was becoming heavy and there was a dull ringing in her ears.

"You'll like my last name. It's Savelyev," he continued, tapping one shoe against the other. "It's a fine old Russian name. I'm single, and no one in the family has been in jail. At least, not in Soviet times, though in tsarist times my father was in every jail as a revolutionary. That's why he's the director of that plant over there now. My mother's also a former heroic revolutionary, though she's a housewife now. I work at my daddy's plant. Alas, I'm only a lathe operator, a member of the working class, so to say. The one that's at the helm of the country now."

"I'm single, too," Natasha suddenly heard herself saying. "My father's in prison. I don't work anyplace and... If you want to know, I've just come from the militia station."

"You sure can pour it on!" Yura said and giggled. "Do you ... do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed nervously. And then, raising her voice to a still-higher pitch, she shouted angrily, "Yes, I do! I've always believed in it!"

"What's the matter? Are you crazy or something?" he asked, backing away a bit. At that very moment the factory whistle sounded hoarsely. "Damn it! It always comes at the wrong time. I still have to stop off at the house and change. The dance ended very late, so I had to

spend the night at a friend's place. What do you say we continue our conference this evening? Will you come to the dance at the community center?" And he was off, shouting back at her, "See you this evening! I really mean it, I like you!"

The cheerful fellow was gone, leaving behind a feeling of emptiness. This Yura and what he had spoken of, the community center, the dance, the factory and his work clothes, were all a part of some distant past that belonged to an unattainable world now, one to which she was now indifferent. She felt dizzy. Her head was hot, and her body was ice-cold. She had not slept all night, so that now she was dreadfully sleepy, but she could not fall asleep on the bench. People would see her and stare. And she couldn't go back to Granny Akulina's house. No. She would go beyond the village again. There were bushes there, and no one would find her if she made her way into the thicket.

Someone was running down the street, his arms flailing. She recognized him immediately. It was the boy in the ski jacket who had been standing by the wall in the Ogorodnikov's house, watching them being led away. For some reason or other he had followed them right up to the militia station.

Natasha was upset at having encountered him again. She hoped he wouldn't recognize her. She lowered her burning head, hoping he would run by and not notice her, but he ran right up and grabbed her hand as if he had a right to.

"Here you are! I knew you wouldn't have gone far," he said, breathing hard. "Come on. I've settled everything. Come on, hear me?"

"Where to? Let go of my hand!"

"I said come on! What're you trying to do, commit suicide?"

"Why can't you leave me alone? I hate you! All of you!"

Semyon paid no attention to what she was saying and dragged her off down the street at a trot.

* * *

An hour before, having wakened after but a few hours of sleep, he had glanced out the window and, seeing that it was still dark, heaved a sigh of relief before dressing quickly. His father was still asleep. His mother was making the stove. When she looked at him in surprise he said, "I'll be right back," waved and ran out.

A few minutes later he was outside the high wooden fence of Kruzhilin's house. He pushed the tall, narrow gate boldly, but it was locked. He then quickly leaped up, got a grip on the top edge of the fence, pulled himself up easily and sailed over it. Once inside he ran up the porch steps and began pounding on the door.

Kruzhilin kept yawning as he sat there, sleepy-eyed, wrapped up in a heavy bathrobe, looking at Semyon in surprise, listening to his jumbled words and having difficulty in understanding what it was all about.

"Not so fast. Calm down if you want me to understand you," Kruzhilin said and cleared his throat. "I was informed over the phone about Kaftanov last night, but I don't know anything about a girl named Natasha. Who is she?"

"I never saw her before yesterday. I think her last name's Mironova. You know what? She wanted to commit suicide! Understand?"

"What did you say her last name was? It sounds familiar." Kruzhilin's eyes suddenly came awake and lit up with interest. "All right, go on." He listened attentively without once interrupting Semyon, and then went over to the phone and asked the operator to get him the man on duty at the militia station.

"Who was the girl you arrested together with Kaftanov last night? A girl named Mironova." Kruzhilin was silent for quite some time as he listened to man on the other end of the line. "What do you mean you've let her go? Why?" He listened again for a minute and then said, "Find her immediately!" Then he hung up and said,

"I thought you'd come too early, but you're late. They let her out about twenty minutes ago. Never mind. They'll find her."

"By the time they get around to it...." Semyon was up and on his way out. "I'll bring her over to see you. I'll be right back. When'll you be at your office? "

"Since I'm up anyway, I'll get dressed and have a glass of tea, and start out."

* * *

When Kruzhilin entered the District Committee building he found Semyon and Natasha sitting in the corridor outside his office. The cleaning lady was busy dusting.

"Here she is," Semyon said and jumped up. "They made her sign a paper saying that she'd get out of Shantara in twenty-four hours' time."

"Come inside," Kruzhilin said, glancing at the girl

Semyon grabbed her hand, pulled her out of her chair and prodded her into the office. She stood there stiffly with her back to the wall and her hands behind her, as if expecting to be tortured.

Kruzhilin was still struggling out of his coat in the corner near the coat rack. "Well, now. Hello, Natasha Mironova. Do you recognize me? "

"Sure. You're a very kind man."

"You do remember. Now tell me what's happened."

"Oh, no." Her voice was both sad and mocking. "I've told it so many times. What's the use? "

"I see," Kruzhilin said, as if agreeing. "So you don't want to."

"I'm a Komsomol member ... a former one, that is. But I went to the City Committee anyway. That was back in Novosibirsk. I wanted to tell them about it. At first, they seemed to listen, but then they started turning away, and some even tried not to look at me. You will, too, when you find out what it's all about."

Just then Yakov Aleinikov entered without knocking. He was in uniform. Natasha glanced at his insignia and fell silent.

"You mean I'll find out your father was arrested? "

"Yes, he was! He was! But why am I to blame? What have I done? Why isn't there a place for me in the world

now? Does that mean I'm a former Soviet citizen, too? Or not a human being any more? But Yelizarov is. He's a human being. Please explain it all. You're a middle-aged man. You've lived a long time. And you, too," she said, turning to Aleinikov. "Tell me what's going on. Tell me! "

Aleinikov took off his greatcoat, hung it on the rack and went over to Natasha. Her cheeks were flaming. The flush was feverish, unhealthy. Her eyes glittered with a consuming black flame, making her thin face harsh and ugly. The flame did not go out under Aleinikov's stare, did not even waver, but seemed to become blacker still.

"What is it? Do you need a maid?" she suddenly asked, and although her voice was now calmer it made him jump. "Maybe I'll do. I can be a maid. Or a concubine. Sure, I can! " her voice rose and broke.

"How am I supposed to understand that?" Aleinikov mumbled. The scar on his cheek was turning blue. He rubbed it.

"Any way you want to. Or maybe you want to know whether I love my country? Go on, ask me! Why don't you ask me?" She was hunched over as if she were going to pounce on Aleinikov and tear him to pieces. Her shawl had slipped off her head. Her forehead and even her cheeks were damp. Kruzhilin rose, came around his desk and went towards her quickly, as if he actually was afraid she might attack Aleinikov.

"Polikarp Matveyevich! " Semyon cried.

Kruzhilin took her by the shoulders and shook her gently. "We will, but not now. What I want you to tell me now is: do you believe your father is guilty? "

"What does that have to do with it? "

"A lot. Especially for you. Do you believe he's guilty? "

She swallowed hard. For a few moments she stared into Kruzhilin's calm eyes like a hounded animal. She even tried to shrug off his heavy hands, but he had a firm grip on her shoulders.

"If you only knew what a wonderful person my father is! If you only knew! " she said and burst into tears.

"Now, now...." he said awkwardly. "Don't cry. You're so hot. Are you ill? You must have a fever."

"No," she shook her head.

Then Natasha sat in the deep armchair opposite him, telling him her long story, from beginning to end. Every now and then she would rub her temples, to relieve the throbbing. She wept, wiping her eyes with her wet hankie bunched into a little ball, and then she would continue. Kruzhilin, Semyon and Aleinikov listened to her story in silence. Semyon kept fidgeting in his chair, not knowing what to do with his hands, while Yakov had his elbows on his knees and kept staring dully at the floor.

"That's enough!" Kruzhilin said suddenly, interrupting her. "That son-of-a-gun Yelizarov! We'll get to him. But you," he looked at Natasha sternly, "you've met up with a couple of rats and you've decided the whole world is bad, that everybody's like them."

"It wasn't a couple! There were so many!"

"All right. So there were twenty! Or even two hundred!" Kruzhilin exclaimed and glanced at Aleinikov angrily. Then, lowering his eyes, he added more calmly, "Although sometimes-it only takes one rat to ruin a person's life. It all depends on how much power the rat has. Do you have a place to stay?"

"Yes," Semyon replied quickly. "She can stay at Granny Akulina's for the time being."

"Fine. Don't worry about a job. There's a whole big factory out there. Do you want to work at the factory?"

"I'll work anyplace. Anyplace. At any job! And you'll see ... you won't be disappointed. I'll...."

"All right. All right. Go on home now. I want you to rest up. You see her home, Semyon."

Natasha rose and went towards the door. Then she turned and said, "Thank you."

* * *

For a long while after Natasha and Semyon had gone, Kruzhilin and Aleinikov sat there in silence.

"When are you leaving, Yakov?" Kruzhilin finally asked.

"It all depends on the draft board now." Aleinikov

slowly straightened up. "I've handed the office over to my successor. He seems to be all right. I think you'll get along with him."

"What's that supposed to be? Revenge for our relationship in the past?"

"What are you talking about, Polikarp! " Aleinikov said and heaved a sigh. He rose and, as was his wont, gazed out of the window, lost in thought. "I'd give a lot to erase the time when ... I couldn't get along with you. And not to have to hear anybody shout like she just did, demanding an explanation of what's happening." A muscle in his cheek twitched.

Kruzhilin still sat back in the armchair by the desk, gazing at Yakov, at his silver-gray temples and lithe body.

"Truth is a very strange thing," Yakov was saying, and there was a bitter note in his voice now. "I thought I always knew where the truth lay. But actually...." He turned to face Kruzhilin. "Will the people who come after us ever understand that we—no matter what mistakes we might have made—that we weren't bastards? We always thought we were acting justly and in the name of justice...."

Kruzhilin did not seem in a hurry to reply. Finally, he said, "You want to know whether they'll understand. In the first place, don't lump everyone together. This is not the time to use words like 'we' and 'us', because among the 'us' there were and are men who are completely honest and there were and are dishonest men, meaning careerists and bastards. Besides, of course, there were and are conscious enemies of our way of life and of our cause."

"Meaning Polipov, for instance?"

"I don't know! " Kruzhilin rose angrily. "Who can tell what's going on inside his head? He's raring to go off to war, too. I can see what's going on inside you. I understand you and, what's most important, I trust you. But I don't know and still can't understand what's going on inside his head. Secondly, our descendants will understand. They'll certainly understand those who were true to themselves. And they'll forgive them. Descendants are always merciful. But why go that far? Even our contemporaries will forgive them if...." Kruzhilin's eyes flashed harshly, as

they had in his youth, and he concluded just as harshly, in no way trying to tone down what he was saying, "If these men who are 'true to themselves' prove their honesty in the way they live out the rest of their natural lives and don't become cowards and commit suicide at the front under the guise of a heroic death in action."

"Polikarp! "

"What's the matter? Don't you like what I'm saying?" Kruzhilin shouted. "I want to give it to you straight from the shoulder, forgetting all about politesse. You've done a lot of lousy things in your life. Don't make a face, it's the God-honest truth. You have, and now you want to chuck all responsibility? Leaving us to explain to that girl why everything's turned out as it has? And we've got to explain it all, because she's got to go on living in this world of ours. But how can she, in the name of what is she supposed to live and bring forth children? In the name of what is she to bring them up? And what sort of ideals is she to nurture in their souls?"

"Polikarp! " Aleinikov pleaded.

"Oh, no, my dear comrade! Since this is the way it's come about, let's try to explain the situation to her together. Because I see you've found an awfully easy way out of it all for yourself." He fell silent, glanced at his watch and went back to his desk. He swept some papers aside impatiently and sat there, hunched over in huff. Yakov trudged over to the coat rack and began pulling on his greatcoat. Kruzhilin watched him in silence.

"Are you waiting for an answer? " Aleinikov said as he stood by the door. Kruzhilin merely shrugged. "I'll tell you this: at first I didn't know why you wanted me to come over and have a look at the girl, but I do now."

"Well? "

"War is war, Polikarp. And you know I'm no coward. If I come through, I'll say it was on account of you. But if I don't come back, don't think it was because I lost my nerve. That's all I can say in reply to what you've said."

The deep furrows on Kruzhilin's brow became smooth, but he said nothing.

* * *

Once outside on the crunching snow, Semyon exclaimed, "See? Everything's fine. Remember what you said about hating everything? Wait! I think you have a fever." He was about to feel her forehead.

"Don't touch me! " Natasha cried and pushed his hand away.

"Come on, hurry. We're going to Granny Akulina's house."

"I can get there myself."

"You can? Then tell me where she lives. Which way do we go? See? You don't know. Come on. Follow me."

He began walking. Natasha hesitated and then followed, feeling that she should not have spoken to him so rudely. After all, he had.... However, the thought had no sooner occurred to her than it was gone, for her head was splitting and she felt dizzy. Semyon disappeared, then reappeared again and asked her something. Suddenly, he started getting smaller and smaller, as if he were sinking into the ground. Then he was gone again, and all was a blank.

Natasha came to her senses in a room in a log house. She saw a window that was frosted over and a blindingly white brick oven that had apparently been recently white-washed. The oven was burning. A shrivelled old woman sat beside it, peeling potatoes. Her face was ashen, and her lips were drawn into her mouth. A girl of about thirteen with pigtails tied into circlets was seated at a small table by the window. The tip of her pink tongue moved with effort. She was either writing or drawing. A cradle hung from a hook imbedded in the ceiling.

"Where am I? " Natasha wondered.

The old woman raised her head at the sound of her sigh, went over to her, bent so close her gray hair nearly brushed Natasha's face, and asked, "Can you see me? "

"Yes. Who are you? "

"Thank God, she's come to! Give me some milk for her, Ganka."

Instead of doing as she was told, the girl with the pigtails ran over to the bed and stared at Natasha. Her eyes

lit up excitedly. Ganka darted over to the oven and reappeared with a mug of milk.

"Aha. Now you drink this," the old woman said.

"I don't want it."

"Nobody's asked you if you want it or not. Go on, drink it!" She stuck her bony arm under the pillow, lifted Natasha up and raised the mug to her lips. The smell of warm milk hit her in the face, making her head swim. And all the while she drank she felt dizzy, quite as if she were drunk and getting drunker.

Then the old woman went back to peeling potatoes, and Ganka sat by the bed, chattering without a stop, gasping excitedly from time to time and occasionally lowering her voice to a frightened whisper. "And Uncle Fyodor said you'd kick the ... you'd die for sure. You should've heard him shout at Semyon for bringing you here. Semyon carried you in, in his arms, like this. Were we scared! And Aunt Anna said to put you on the bed in their room. She's awfully kind and good. And so's Semyon. They all are. Except Uncle Fyodor. He's mean, and he's always mad at everybody. I'm scared of him. My name's Ganka. My real name's Galina, but everybody calls me Ganka. We're refugees, too. We used to live in the Ukraine. We had an orchard right outside our house. You know how big the apples were? Daddy and Grandad planted the trees. I saw a bomb burst in the orchard. And then the house caught fire, 'cause it had a thatched roof. Then we all ran to the railroad station, and I guess the house just burned down. Our daddy's fighting at the front lines, and we're all here now. But he doesn't know we're here. And he doesn't know that Grandad died. Grandad made this stove himself. He was an oven-maker. And then he died. Every time Mamma makes the stove now she cries. She says that the man who made the stove's gone, but his stove is here to remind us of him. This house belongs to the Savelyevs. And this used to be a storeroom, but Mamma and Grandad made it over into a real room. Because it was awfully crowded before. Aunt Anna says that as soon as the walls are whitewashed it'll really look nice. Where'll you live now? Will you stay here with us? There's enough room now. Aunt Anna let us have two whole rooms. Semyon

and his brothers Dima and Andrei live in the other room and she and Uncle Fyodor sleep in the kitchen."

Natasha didn't understand half of what Ganka was talking about, but one thing she did understand was that she was now in Semyon's house. "How long have I been here? "

"This is your fourth day here. You don't know how happy Semyon'll be when he finds out you're getting better! He comes in every morning and every evening to ask how you are. He's at work now, and so is Mamma, and everybody else, too. Andrei's in school, and Dima's gone ice-skating. And Yura'll be glad your're getting well. He came over yesterday, too, and just stood here, staring at you. Then he said he waited and waited for you outside the community center."

There were so many names in Ganka's story that Natasha had a hard time following her. The ringing in her ears was still there, and her head throbbed at the slightest movement.

"Wait a minute! Who's Yura? "

"He's Semyon's cousin. He's awfully funny."

"What's his last name? "

"It's Savelyev, too. His father's the head chief of the plant. That's where my mother works."

Natasha recalled the smiling fellow in the leather jacket who had tried to date her. He hadn't made her smile then, she did now. It was a timid smile that barely touched her pale lips. It seemed to her all of a sudden that this was not real, that reality meant Yelizarov, the militiamen, Masha Ogorodnikova and the bandits. They seemed to be converging on her. Their boots pounded loudly. Her eyes grew big. She raised herself up and stared at the door which suddenly burst open. Semyon entered. Yura followed.

"Look! She really is better! At last," Semyon said. "Hello, there."

"How do you do, Natasha? " Yura said and smiled. "Though I greet you, I demand to know who gave you the right to be sick? Such a nice fellow was waiting for her in vain at the dance. He even cancelled all his press conferences for the occasion."

"Dry up for a minute," Semyon said shouldering him

away. "How do you feel, Natasha? "

"Can't you see she's fine? In a couple of days from now we'll do an exhibition foxtrot, wait and see."

"You'll have a long wait," Natasha said. She did not like what he had said, or the way he had said it, or even his voice.

The old woman entered, carrying the empty pail. "Now scat! Both of you! The girl's barely come to her senses. Go on, I said! "

"Don't be like that, Granny Fenya. Can't you see she's smiling? " Yura protested.

"Why, I bet just looking at you makes a girl faint from joy," the old woman retorted as she prodded them out without further ado.

Semyon left meekly. He waved in parting, but Yura resisted jokingly, calling out from the threshold, "Don't forget, now. The director's orders are to deliver you hale and hearty, so's you can be put on the payroll! "

"What a blabbermouth," the old woman muttered as she shut the door behind him.

But Natasha was smiling, she knew not why. Both of the boys still had on their work clothes. They smelled of the frosty air, of machine oil and metal, and the mingled smell hung in the room after they were gone. She breathed it in eagerly and smiled.

* * *

On January 20 it began snowing heavily and continued every day after. Large snowflakes drifted down descending softly upon the earth, the rooftops and the trees. Snowdrifts piled up in front and back gardens. Whenever the sun came out the virgin snow would sparkle so it hurt your eyes. Everything was clean and still, and cozy-looking.

This was the way Natasha now felt. Everything she had been through seemed like a terrible nightmare. At times she even thought it had never occurred and that she had read it all in some horror-book. She had got a job as a waitress at the plant canteen for engineers and technicians, and had started on the job a few days before. The dining

hall was a small room in a hastily-built wooden barracks.

Semyon and Yuri had escorted her to the small, two-story barracks-type building that housed the plant office. They had climbed the stairs to the second floor and stopped outside a door marked "Director".

"Oh! I didn't know I'd have to see the director! " Natasha gasped.

"I'll bet he'll gobble you up! " Yura replied and strode right in.

Natasha looked out the window. She could see most of the factory yard, the four new brick buildings with large square windows that were frosted over and seemed unpleasantly white and blank, the several buildings still under construction, which nevertheless housed long rows of lathers. Men and women were working at the lathes.

"You mean ... you mean that's how they work? Out in the open? " she asked in surprise.

"As you see."

"But it's freezing cold! "

"So it is."

The factory yard was dotted with sheds. Several chimneys were smoking. Clouds of steam poured forth from one of the buildings. Showers of sparks appeared where the welders were working. People hurried back and forth. Some were pounding at the frozen ground with crowbars, others carted the soil off in wheel-barrow. Still others were loading or unloading trucks.

"Be seeing you. Yura'll manage everything from now on in," Semyon said in annoyance and walked off.

"Semyon! Semyon! " Natasha pleaded, but he did not stop.

The director was a man of average height with a large forehead and drooping shoulders. He was wearing a new army shirt. After Yura had nudged her into the office the director seemed to size her up. She did not like the look of his cold, gray eyes.

"Is there any special job you'd like here, Natasha? "

Something strange happened: although he was still looking at her keenly, his eyes now seemed kindly and wise.

"I really don't know. I've never had a job before."

"How about sending her to our shop? As an apprentice lathe-operator," Yura suggested.

"And who's going to instruct here? You?"

"Why not?"

"A lathe-operator is a skilled worker. You can learn the trade if you wish." The director pressed a button on the under side of his desk. "For the time being, Natasha, I suggest the following. There's no heat anywhere as yet, except here in my office and in the dining room."

A sprightly old man entered. He had a stiff, tobacco-stained moustache, and a pair of eyeglasses rested on his forehead.

"Now then, Filipp Filippovich," the director said. "This is Natasha Mironova. She's been evacuated from Moscow. Their train was bombed on the way, and her mother was killed. She has no papers of any kind. Everything was lost during the air raid. ('He knows!' " Natasha breathed with a sigh of relief. "But who told him? Yura? Or the Party Secretary? ") 'I'd like you to put her on the payroll as a waitress in the engineers' dining room. Issue her a pass and everything else she'll need.' Then, turning to Natasha, he said with a trace of a smile, "You're to start in tomorrow morning."

Natasha now awoke at the sound of the factory whistle. She would get up, trying not to disturb Ganka, whose bed she shared, wash, dress hastily, say goodbye to Granny Fenya and Maria Firsova, who would be busy preparing breakfast for her family, and hurry off to the plant.

The engineers' dining room was set apart from the large plant canteen by a flimsy partition. The noise and commotion, and clatter of dishes coming from behind it never ceased. The dining room contained two long, unpainted tables that were covered with bedsheets instead of tablecloths. There were rough, unpainted benches instead of chairs, and the benches had a grimy, unwashed look. Rufina Ivanovna, the woman who was in charge of the dining room, was large-faced and stoop-shouldered. She told Natasha that her job would include waiting on tables, clearing away, cleaning the room, washing the sheet-tablecloths and the window curtains.

"There are only two cleaning women for the cafeteria, and they have no time for this room," she said crossly. She stared hard at Natasha and added rudely, "You can stuff yourself here, but don't let me catch you taking any food out! "

"I'm no thief! "

"Everybody's honest when they start out. I've been here long enough to know what I'm talking about."

After her very first day on the job ended, Natasha washed the bedsheets and curtains in the kitchen tub. Then she scraped the wooden tables and benches with a large butcher knife, washed them with hot water and soap, and wiped and washed the dusty, dull windows and windowsills. Before going home every evening she would scrub the floor.

Rufina Ivanovna kept an eye on her, but never commented. She would frown, as if she were displeased by Natasha's efforts. But one evening she raised the edge of the bedsheet, ran her hand over the clean table underneath, sat down on one of the benches so that her knobby knees stuck out and said, "It's quite a load, isn't it? "

"I don't mind."

"I heard somebody say your mother was killed in an air raid."

"Yes, she was."

"You should be eating more. You're much too thin," Rufina Ivanovna sighed.

Strangely, everyone she met now, everyone she waited on in the dining room, made her feel good, made her feel happy. It was a hard job. All during the long day she made endless trips from the tables to the serving counter, carrying heavy plates of borshch and goulash, then cleared away the dirty dishes and wiped the tables. In the evening she tidied up and scrubbed the floor. However, she did not feel really tired, if not for the pain in her wrists.

In time she came to know all the top executives, the shop foremen, and engineers. They were all so different. Ivan Ivanovich Khokhlov, an engineer, was a small, roly-poly man. First, his round stomach would appear in the door way, then his ever-smiling face, and he would say, "What's on the menu today, Natasha dear? " although the

kitchen never served anything but goulash and borshch. Savchuk, the plant's Party organizer, was a silent Ukrainian. He would enter, nod to Natasha, wash his hands painstakingly behind the small curtain in the corner, then take his place at the end of the table, a place that was always reserved for him, and would immediately pull out a newspaper. He would read intently, forgetting his soup that was getting cold, then, suddenly recalling where he was, would gulp down his borshch and goulash and stride out. Fyodor Fyodorovich Nechayev, the chief engineer, never smiled or read at the table. He was tall and thin, and would sit up stiffly, waiting for Natasha to bring him his lunch, while his long, bony fingers twirled his spoon, and his thoughts were far away. Natasha sometimes felt that if she didn't bring him his food he would sit there for an hour, or even two, and never remember why he had come.

The three men always came in at different times, but one day they all showed up together. As Nechayev took off his long coat and hung it on the rack he was saying loudly as his voice rose in anger,

"And I say no! No, no, no! What do I care if Polipov's leaving for active duty? Let him go. Let them find another chairman for the Executive Committee wherever they want to. We need Khokhlov here."

"I'll be only too happy if you get me out of it, Fyodor Fyodorovich," fat little Khokhlov replied, looking up at tall, emaciated Nechayev. "I've no idea what to do there, at that job. I've spent my whole life working in factories."

"But hasn't Kruzhilin settled the matter with the people at the Regional Committee?" Savchuk asked as he washed his hands.

"I couldn't care less!" Nechayev had reached the boiling point. "We're to start producing mortars this spring. Of three different calibers. How do you think we're supposed to do that under the present conditions?"

"Take it easy," Savchuk said.

"So that's it! You're in cahoots with Kruzhilin. As far as that galo, Savelyev is, too!"

"We're not in cahoots with anyone! This is a very serious thing!" Savchuk replied, raising his voice, too. Natasha was surprised to see that he could be so angry.

"All you're thinking about is the plant, but Kruzhilin has to worry about the plant and the rest of the district as well! Try to understand him."

"I don't want to! And I won't! "

"I'm afraid you'll have to, Fyodor Fyodorovich."

This clash among the chief executives somehow encouraged Natasha, making her feel as if she, too, was now a part of things and no longer an outsider.

Two days before she had first set eyes on Polipov, the man in question. He and Kruzhilin had called a meeting at the plant and then, accompanied by the director, Savelyev, had stopped by for lunch. Natasha had served them the usual borshch and goulash. Kruzhilin had smiled at her and enquired how she was making out in her new job. Polipov did not even glance in her direction. He chewed away methodically, staring at his plate, and his ears wiggled as he chewed. She had been repulsed at the sight of his ears and his broad, heavy shoulders, but now, when she learned he was about to leave for the front lines, she decided that there was really nothing so terrible about his ears or shoulders, and she scolded herself for having formed such a hasty opinion of him.

For about three days after that Khokhlov appeared in the dining room and asked what was on the menu as usual, but he hardly spoke during the meal. Natasha mustered up the courage to ask him whether he was leaving the plant.

"Yes, I am, my dear. But I don't want to. I really don't."

"I don't want you to, either," she found herself saying.

"You mean that? Well, thanks. Thanks a million! "

He stopped coming to the dining room after that. She found out that he had been transferred to the Executive Committee, to take Polipov's place.

Yura showed up in the dining room on Natasha's first day on the job. He was in high spirits, as always. "Well, Miss Nataliya, how's life been treating you? I hope nobody's giving you a hard time here. How about some lunch for the director's only and beloved son? "

Natasha didn't know whether she was allowed to serve Yura, since he was not attached to the dining room so she went out to the kitchen to ask.

"Go ahead and serve him lunch," Rufina Ivanovna said.

Yura began dropping in often after that. He always joked and teased, but since his jokes never varied, Natasha found she was getting more and more annoyed by them. Then one day as he was leaving, Rufina Ivanovna looked after him and said,

"There goes a silly goat if I ever saw one."

"Why?"

"His head is full of bubbles."

This was such a good description of Yura that it made Natasha smile.

On several occasions Yura showed up outside the barracks just as she was getting ready to leave, and he would invariably say, "Ah! I can walk you home, if you don't mind. I'm on my way home too."

Natasha felt awkward about his walking her home, for she didn't want anyone to see them. They talked of their work and the plant on the way. One day, as they reached Natasha's house, he said, "I thought you wanted to move in with Granny Akulina?"

"I guess I should, because the family's awfully cramped here. I don't know what's stopping me or, what I'm afraid of."

"I'd move if I were you. She's all by herself there, so you won't be crowded."

He made her feel uncomfortable. It was as if she had finally managed to escape the terrible whirlpool and was on fairly dry ground, like a drowning person who had clambered up onto a moving ice floe. She now stood on the floe, trying not to move and lose her footing, not to be cast back into the icy waters again, while Yura, all unawares, was trying to shake the floe.

* * *

Nevertheless, Natasha kept saying to herself that it was high time she did move. From the day she started on her new job Semyon had been avoiding her, frowning whenever he encountered her, while his mother, Anna Mikhail-

lovna, was as silent as the grave, merely nodding to her in the morning as she passed through the kitchen on her way to work. Mariya Firsovna, who had been so talkative and attentive, hardly spoke to her now, to say nothing of Granny Fenya, who had not uttered a word, it seemed, since Natasha had recuperated. All three women kept sighing as if a heavy weight were pressing on them. As for Semyon's father, she had not once heard the sound of his voice. Fyodor Silantyevich was still asleep in the kitchen with his beard to the wall when she left for work, and when she returned he was usually asleep in the same position. If not, his cold eyes would follow her as she crossed the kitchen, and his black moustache would twitch with displeasure.

But she had nowhere to go. She was afraid to move in with Granny Akulina, because Manya Ogorodnikova lived next door. Natasha had overheard Semyon and his mother talking. They had said Manya had been let out, but the moment Natasha had entered they had stopped talking. It had even seemed to her that they had looked frightened. She realized that Manya had saved her life, but after all that had happened she was afraid of the woman with the large breasts who kept a hideaway for thugs and hated her. "I wonder why they let her out? And what about those bandits? Did they let them out, too? No. I can't move in with Granny Akulina. What if Manya shows up one night and makes me go to her house? I'll try to rent a cot someplace at the other end of the village."

"Nobody'll rent you any space now! " Rufina Ivanovna said when Natasha confided in her. "We're all packed in like sardines. Maybe there might be a place for you in one of the dugouts, but you'll have to talk to the director about it."

It would have been very simple to approach him, since he came to the dining room every single day. Once he had even asked her how things were coming along and whether she had been issued a pass.

"Not yet. As soon as I get my pay I'll go and have my picture taken. They said I had to have a picture for my pass."

The director had taken a bill from his wallet and said,

"Go and have it taken."

"I can't take that."

"Yes, you can," He rose and left, leaving the bill on the table.

Natasha dared not speak to him about moving after that. For several evenings after she had gone hunting for a room, fearful of bumping into Yelizarov, but her search was in vain. She would return chilled to the bone and stand by the brick oven for a long time, trying to warm up. Mariya Firsova would look at her keenly, but never asked her where she had been.

Once, when Natasha had come home late, as usual, and was warming herself by the stove, Anna Mikhailovna brought in a coat that was nearly new. It had a rabbit-fur collar. Here, try this on."

"Oh, no! I won't! "

"Where have you been every evening, out so late? "

"Oh.... You're awfully cramped here. Don't think I don't know it. And I'm awfully grateful for everything you've done for me. I'll never forget it." Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Go, silly. Cry if you haven't cried enough till now," Anna Mikhailovna said. "How could you have even thought of such a thing? You stay on here with us and wear the coat."

"That's just what you are: silly," Mariya Firsova said after Anna had left the room. "How could you have ever thought of looking for a place to live? What do you think we are, monsters? "

"I don't know. I thought.... Fyodor Silantievich always looks at me so crossly. And none of you ever say a word to me, as if I..."

"You're right. We hardly do talk," she sighed. "And so you got it into your silly head that it's on account of you living here. It's because Anna and her children are so unhappy, that's why."

"Why? Tell me."

"It's not for me to tell other people's tales. Besides, I don't really know. No matter how hard you look at another person's life, you won't really see all there is to see."

After a pause Natasha said, "Semyon's father and the

director of the plant are brothers, aren't they? "

"They were born to the same parents, but they're like strangers."

"Why? "

"How do you expect me to know? Sometimes life does things like that. As far as I can see, they can't find a way out of it themselves, so how do you expect a stranger to understand what it's all about? They have a third brother. His name's Ivan, and he lives on the collective farm. He seems like a good man, but he and Fyodor don't get along, either. Who knows what it's all about? But I'll tell you this much: Ivan's had a very hard time. He spent years in prison for something or other."

"But you said he's a good man? What'd they jail him for if he is? " Natasha's eyes grew wide with fear.

"Oh, me! " the elder woman said and began turning down the bed.

Granny Fenya had been lying on the high bed-shelf of the brick oven for quite a while, mumbling to herself. Children were shrieking and laughing in the next room.

"Now it's Dima's turn! It's your turn to be a nazi, Dima! And you look just like one," Andrei was shouting.

"I do not! "

"You do so! You're tall and skinny, and you have dead eyes."

"Somebody I know is going to get his face bashed in! "

"Dima! Dima! It's only a game! It's just pretending! " Ganka piped up.

"You and who else? " Andrei challenged, his dander up. "Wait'll I take care of you! Semyon showed me a judo trick yesterday. Go on, hit me! "

Something in the manner of their argument seemed strange to Natasha at the moment, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it, because she was thinking about something else. "What'd they put Ivan in jail for? "

"I don't know. Anna says he was innocent."

Natasha sat in silence for a long time, resting her tired arms on the table. Every now and then she would frown to herself. Suddenly her lips began to tremble. "I keep getting more and more mixed up as time goes on. I don't under-

stand anything any more. Take my father, for instance. My father was also...."

"I heard about him, dear. Semyon told me. Don't worry. Everything'll turn out all right in the end. Good will prevail."

"But when? When? "

"All in good time. I haven't had much education, but I know that life'll settle all accounts, putting the good in with the good and the bad in with the bad. That's because things are just in the end."

"In good time...." Natasha wiped her tears with the edge of her hand. Her chest heaved slightly and she said in a near-whisper, "Maybe I believe that, too. Because if I didn't, how could I go on living? And what for? "

"That's right, dear. That's right."

"But what I can't understand is why there's still so much evil in the world. And where does it come from? I can understand the war. The fascists want to conquer our land and our cities, to make everyone their slaves, so that they can rule the world and own everything. But what I want to know is why there's still so much evil in our life. I mean, what's happened to my father? And to this man Ivan? And I nearly died. I know, it was a cowardly thing to do, but I'd reached the end of my rope. Why can such things happen? "

Maria Firsova sat down on a stool, placed the pillow she was holding on her knees and began smoothing out the wrinkles with her coarse, work-weary hands.

"Do you understand what I mean? "

"Of course I do. It's not that hard to understand. But it's hard to find an answer. You want to know where evil comes from? From stupidity. I've been thinking it over in this battered old head of mine, and the way I see it is: you take everybody there is. What'll you get? Why, people are like babes in arms. And there's a lot of trouble a baby'll get himself into until he learns how to think properly."

"You mean to say that the world is still a very unsettled place? "

"You might put it that way. Yes, that's it. It doesn't have the brains for it yet."

"I think talking about mankind in general isn't what I

mean. I mean right here, in our country. Our fathers, why, they were the ones who fought for the revolution. So much blood was shed in the name of justice and good. But where are they? ”

“You mean there isn’t any good at all? ” Maria Firsova stopped smoothing out the pillow to look straight at Natasha. “You’re right. You nearly did die. But a wagon wheel might run over an anthill by mistake, or a rush of rainwater might wash it away. And the ants’ll think it’s the end of the world. But all around them the sun’ll be shining and the flowers’ll be in bloom. The world is a very big place.”

“How can you say such a thing? People aren’t ants! ”

Maria Firsova sighed again and ran her hand over the pillow again. “Yes, I know. That’s not what I meant. I don’t have the brains to answer your questions. But people helped you. We didn’t let you die.”

“It was just luck. Manya Ogorodnikova stumbled over me. It was just plain luck.”

“We can go on talking like this forever, Natasha. And every word seems to be right in its own way. But here’s something for you to think about: often you hardly notice the good things. And maybe a person won’t remember the times he was happy for long. But you can’t forget evil that quick. It keeps burning a hole inside of you, eating out your heart. That’s why it sometimes seems that there’s more evil in the world than good, and that there are more bad people than good ones. That’s wrong, dear. There are so many good, kind people in this world, and that means there’s more good than evil.” She rose and patted the pillow. “As for the revolution, don’t be so quick to jump to conclusions like that. Did you ever see real cutthroats? Maybe you did, in the movies or in a book. You don’t know how much evil there was before, which means you can’t compare it with how much there is now. But I can.”

“I know there’s less now. But it’s more than enough as far as I’m concerned.”

“Right. But my children’ll see less of it, and yours will see even less than mine.”

Natasha turned crimson at this. Feeling the blood rising to her face, she threw back her head and protested.

"Why should I have any children! " She became still redder and spun around just as sharply, baring her thin, scrawny neck.

"Silly," Maria Firsovna said and stroked her head. "Why, of course you'll have children. See how nicely you're put together, and what a pretty face you have. Why, Semyon already has an eye on you."

"What? " Natasha bounded up, feeling that her face was aflame. Her eyes expressed amazement, fear, anger and hatred in turn. "Oh, he does, does he? "

Maria Firsovna looked confused and guilty. "Oh, dear. There's a reason why they say women should have their tongues shortened the minute they're born! Dear Lord! "

Natasha lurched towards the coat rack for her tattered coat, but it was gone. She dashed outside in her dress and was immediately gripped by the icy clutches of frost so that she stopped short on the porch. Her heart pounded painfully, as a captured bird's. The disgust welling up inside of her made her want to flee, to dive into a snow-drift, to burrow into it, out of sight, so that no one would ever find her.

"You'll catch cold, and we'll have to care for you again. What's the matter? " Maria Firsovna said, throwing the warm coat over her shoulders.

"Leave me alone! So you say he has an eye on me? He and who else? His father, who's always looking daggers at me? Him, too? "

"What's his father got to do with it? "

"Everything! Other men had their eye on me, too. That militiaman Yelizarov wanted to ... and then over at Manya Ogorodnikova's house.... They said I was an orphan anyway, and nobody'd stick up for me anyway."

"Wait a minute! Is that it? Why, you must be out of your mind, child! How could you even have thought such a thing? Why, Semyon.... That's not it at all! It's just the opposite." The grown woman was searching for the right words, but they seemed to be eluding her. However, Natasha suddenly began to understand what she was trying to say.

"I don't believe you. Nobody'd want to ... I mean, the opposite. Not if it's me."

"You're all wrong. I can see what's going on, dear, and my woman's heart tells me he's been hit hard, even though he doesn't understand what's happening to him yet. I think he's scared, because it's all so sudden and unexpected. He's sort of ashamed of the way things are turning out. You were more dead than alive when he brought you here, and now.... That's why he's trying to avoid you. Besides, Yura's been tagging along after you. Oh, Natasha dear, how could you have misunderstood me so?"

As Natasha listened to her she felt something melt inside her chest and flow through her veins, making her dizzy, making it difficult for her to follow what Maria Firsova was saying. Why was she saying all this? What did she care about Natasha or Semyon, or how Natasha had understood her?

"He wants to volunteer for active service. He keeps hounding the draft board," Maria Firsova was saying. "He's trying to forget the feeling that's stirring inside him. He understands, not like that Yura. Semyon isn't a flashy boy. He's shy, but inside he's strong and good. And don't be mad at me for what I said."

"I don't know what you're saying. It's all so mixed up. I want to be alone for a while. Please leave me alone."

After Maria Firsova had gone back into the house Natasha stood outside on the porch for a while leaning against the door jamb, gazing up at the heavy, round disc of the moon that was rising beyond the village, gulping the cold air to cool her burning body. Her mind was a blank. She did not see Semyon approach as he came home from work. She was brought up with a start by the sound of his voice.

"Hello."

She backed away and then ran down the porch steps.

"Natasha?" he took a step towards her.

"Don't you dare! Leave me alone! Go away!"

He stood there for a moment, then went inside. Natasha sank down on a step and began to cry for no good reason. Yet, these were not bitter tears. They flowed easily and brought her a great sense of relief. That night she wept again, and once again her tears were sweet.

As she lay in bed she recalled the children's conversa-

tion in the next room and suddenly realized what it was that had seemed strange to her. In the first place, Dima, that silent, sullen boy whom she did not like, for she thought he was mean and crafty, and would grow up to be just like his father, had suddenly become offended when Andrei had said that he looked like a nazi. Secondly, she had discovered that Semyon was learning judo wrestling. She'd never have guessed that. Then again, Maria Firsova thought well of him. What was it she had said? That he was shy, but was strong and good inside. And that he wasn't a flashy boy. That, certainly, was the truth. You couldn't say that about Yura, though. Besides, Rufina Ivanovna had said that Yura.... But how could you tell Semyon was strong and good? No, she didn't want to think about either of them! All those Savelyevs were strange. Their relationships were so muddled, their life was so unlike the family life she had known. She would never be able to unravel it. However, no one was asking her to. Sooner or later she would rent a room and move out. She'd thank them all for what they'd done for her and leave. Natasha tried to fall asleep but could not. Ganka snuffled in her sleep and tossed in bed, pressing her warm little body against her and breathing on her shoulder.

"Aren't you sleeping, Natasha?" Ganka whispered suddenly.

"No. Why aren't you?"

"I'm thinking."

Natasha was glad the child had spoken and distracted her. She put her arm around Ganka's bony shoulders and drew her closer.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, I don't know. Do you think Dima's nice?"

"I really don't know. Maybe he is."

"He is. He's very good. You should've seen him today when he...." she giggled and buried her head in Natasha's shoulder.

Natasha thought that perhaps Dima really was a nice boy and not as she had imagined him to be.

"Natasha," Ganka whispered right into her ear, "did you ever kiss a boy?"

"What're you talking about? What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I just said that. I just wanted to know what it's like." She giggled self-consciously again, pulled the covers up over her head and was as still as a mouse. A few moments later she stuck her head out and said, "I shouldn't have said that, should I?"

"There's nothing wrong in asking. Only I don't know what to tell you, because I've never kissed a boy, either."

At the sound of her own voice Natasha's heart began to ache, and tears welled up in her eyes. The ache was gone in a moment, giving way to a flood of hot tears that ran down her cheeks and onto the pillow.

"Natasha! What's the matter? Why are you crying?" Ganka waited in vain for an answer. Then, as if having understood something, she moved away cautiously and said no more.

Natasha cried herself to sleep.

* * *

The next morning Natasha, Maria Firsovna and Ganka were ashamed to look at each other, as if they had suddenly discovered something embarrassing about each other. Maria Firsovna pottered about the kitchen, preparing an early breakfast in silence. Ganka was getting her books together for school, casting a frightened look at Natasha every now and then. Natasha could not believe that Ganka and Dima were old enough to fall in love.

Natasha, however, felt the most uncomfortable of the three. She could not understand how she could have so misconstrued what Maria Firsovna had said about Semyon the previous day, or how she could have reacted so stupidly.

Maria Firsovna seemed to understand the state Natasha was in, for as she was leaving for work she turned in the doorway and said, "Never mind. It's all right." They would often go to the plant together, but this morning Maria Firsovna did not ask her to join her. Natasha was grateful to her for that.

Natasha left the house about ten minutes later. It was still dark outside, and a cold ground wind was blowing at her back. She raised the fur collar of her coat. As she

walked slowly down the street she watched the snow flurries circling in the beams of light cast by the windows of the houses and was thinking about Semyon with distaste.

"Who does he think he is to have an eye on me? Sure, he's done a lot for me. He took me to see Kruzhilin, and I don't know what would've happened to me if he didn't come along just then. But that doesn't mean I have to throw myself into his arms. He might as well know that there's no use even waiting. I don't like him one bit. Maybe he even did it on purpose. Why'd he have to take me to his house when I blacked out? He could've taken me to Granny Akulina's place."

However, she had a funny feeling that there was something wrong about her reasoning, and perhaps it was all wrong. In the first place, Granny Akulina lived at the far end of the village. Secondly, Semyon didn't seem to be waiting for her to throw herself into his arms at all. In fact, he was avoiding her like the plague. Not Yura, though. He kept waiting for her everywhere, and he behaved as though she was somehow indebted to him. Thirdly, yes, she was indifferent towards Semyon, even though she was grateful to him for everything he'd done. Actually, he wasn't bad-looking. He had gray eyes that were kind and deep, and silky blond hair, and a girl's soft skin. But he was broad-shouldered and muscular, and she felt that he had probably not even felt her weight when he had carried her all the way home that day.

Natasha was unaware of thinking of him all through the day, going over everything she knew about him, and so, when Yura came by for lunch she unconsciously compared them, concluding that Semyon was by far the nicer of the two. Even Yura's hooked nose made him resemble a bird of prey.

"I have a really stupendous suggestion," Yura said after he had finished his lunch.

"Like what? You mean going to the dance? I can't."

"Much better than that! The river's frozen over."

"So what? "

"So what! The ice'll be as smooth as glass by tomorrow. How about going ice-skating with me? "

"How can I? I don't have any skates."

"It's all been figured out. You know what I've got for you?"

"I don't have time to go skating," she said, cutting him short.

"Ah, Madame, you're not being fair," he replied and left, and although he had said it in jest, he had sounded disappointed.

The temperature rose in the afternoon, melting frost on the windows, so that Natasha was busy wiping the wet sills. She kept looking out at the factory yard, hoping to see Semyon. Trucks and tractors rumbled by, and each time one did she'd look out.

However, she did not see him until she was on her way home that evening. Semyon's tractor and trailer, loaded with bright orange crates, was standing by the warehouse known as "Number 8".

The warehouse had a barbed-wire fence around it, and there was always an armed guard posted by the wide gate. Natasha knew it was an ammunition dump.

By the light of bright lanterns several men were unloading the orange crates carefully and carrying them into the warehouse. Semyon, wearing a grease-stained old jacket, was leaning halfway into the motor of his tractor, shining a flashlight on it. Then, still unaware of Natasha's presence he climbed into the cab, raised the seat and rummaged about in the toolbox.

Natasha had not expected her heart to leap as it did at the sight of Semyon. It first surprised and then exasperated her. Finally, recalling Ganka's question of the previous evening, she stood quite helplessly by the tractor cab.

"Oh," Semyon said and jumped down. He was holding a wrench and a greasy rag. "Going home? I still have to make another trip to the station."

"That's all right," she said and felt she had said something stupid, although he was smiling for some reason or other. "What's in the crates?"

"Odds and ends. I don't even know for sure."

"Sure he does. He just doesn't want to tell me. Or maybe he's not allowed to tell," she said to herself. Then, feeling still more confused she mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"For everything. For what happened yesterday."

"What happened yesterday that was so special?"

The way he said it took a load off her chest. Indeed, he really was good-natured and didn't bear a grudge. She smiled and walked off, fearful lest her good mood be dispelled.

However, it was not dispelled during her long walk home or even after she bumped into a girl named Vera Iniutina who lived next door.

"What's the matter? You blind or something?" Vera shouted. Her eyes flashed like a lynx's.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about something."

"Keep your eyes open next time."

Natasha had glimpsed Vera on several previous occasions and each time she had felt the other girl sizing her up. Vera had apparently decided that Natasha did not amount to much, because each time she had pursed her full lips scornfully and narrowed her almond eyes.

Dima, Andrei, Ganka and Vera's younger brother Kolya were shouting and playing outside the house. Kolya had come inside several times during Natasha's illness. Each time he had stared at her as she had lain in bed, sniffled and rubbed an ink-stained finger across his upper lip, wiping his nose. One day when she was feeling better, she had asked him his name.

"Broun Falcon."

"What? What?"

"Stop quacking and get better, that's what."

Natasha was taken aback. Kolya had seemed just as embarrassed at his own words, though. He had turned on his heel and disappeared and had not come again.

Now the children were tumbling about in the snow, trying to harness a shaggy dog to a sled.

"Don't, Dima! Andrei, Kolya! Don't!" Ganka was screaming. "You'll hurt her!"

"A lot you know! She's used to it, understand?" Kolya shouted back. "You should've seen her pull me when I went ice-skating yesterday."

"Stop torturing the poor dog," Natasha said as she came up to them.

The children stopped shouting. Kolya, who was kneel-



ing, looked up at her.

"What's it to you? She's not your dog."

"You know you're wrong."

"That's what I said, but they wouldn't listen to me! " Ganka cried.

"Ah, shut up! " Kolya shouted, but he untied the dog all the same. It squealed happily, ran off and darted through the gate of the Iniutins' house.

"Promise me you'll never torture her again, will you, Kolya? " Natasha said.

"You know what you can do! " he muttered and began winding up the straps he had used for a harness.

Natasha was in good spirits all evening. She recalled her encounter with Vera and wondered why the other girl disliked her. However, she soon forgot all about Vera.

Anna was busy doing the family's wash that evening. Fyodor was sleeping when Natasha came in. She thanked Anna for the coat and said she'd pay her off in installments if Anna would sell it to her.

"Don't be silly," Anna retorted. "If you're not too tired, you can help me hang out the wash."

They went out into the yard, and for some time after they were busy hanging laundry on the line in the dark. The wash was wet and so cold it made their hands ache. Afterwards Natasha helped Maria Firsovna feed the baby its cereal and put it to sleep in the hanging cradle. Helping around the house further improved her mood. She felt as if something very wonderful was about to happen, that it was just around the corner.

Not until Natasha was in bed did a strange uneasiness descend upon her, marring her happiness. She did not know what it was all about, but could not fall asleep and began listening to the fading sounds of the house. The harder she listened, the greater her anxiety became. Then she recalled her talk with Semyon on the way home and decided that he certainly had known what was in the orange-colored crates. She recalled how carefully the workers had carried them into the warehouse. But Semyon was making trip after trip over the bumpy road, with the crates bouncing on every rut. How dangerous was it? She recalled the frightening black skulls and crossbones inked

on each crate.

Icy fingers clutched at her heart. She rubbed her chest, but the unpleasant ache did not go away. "Goodness! What's the matter with me? It can't be dangerous or they wouldn't be carting those crates all the way from the station."

At last the outside door slammed, the frozen floorboards of the cold pantry creaked and she heard Semyon's muffled voice saying,

"This was a day to end all others. And the motor's been coughing."

"How about some supper?" his mother asked.

"All right, if you have something hot."

At the sound of his voice the ache in Natasha's heart disappeared, her anxiety vanished and her body became weightless. However, the sudden change frightened her no less and she sat up quickly. She felt hot inside and short of breath. "What's the matter with me? What do I care about him?" The words seemed to appear of their own accord and rang inside her head. She lay back again or, rather, was about to, but the bed suddenly disappeared from under her and she felt she was falling into a void.

* * *

There are dreams that seem real and there is reality that seems like a dream.

Natasha did not know when it had all begun. Had it been on that evening when she had sat up in bed, her head ringing with the words "What do I care about him?", or a day before, when Maria Firsova had told her Semyon had his eye on her, or when Ganka had whispered hotly in her ear: "Did you ever kiss a boy, Natasha?"

Or perhaps it had begun a few days before that, when she had been issued an official pass with her name written in fine script on it. No one in the world could have told her when it had all begun, nor did she want anyone to, either.

* * *

When Natasha went to get her pass she was afraid someone might have changed his mind at the last moment and that she would not be issued one after all. But she was.

"He did it for me. It's only because Kruzhilin told them to. They'd never have given me a job otherwise," she was thinking on her way back home.

Then she came abreast of the bench under the trees where she had sat on that cold, gray morning nearly a month before. She had been thinking of suicide then, of going off beyond the village and lying down in the bushes so that no one would find her until the following spring, or even summer, or maybe not even then. Nobody in the whole wide world would have known what had happened to her then. Nobody would have ever remembered her, or even that a girl named Natasha had ever been born. But then he had come along. He had first appeared in Manya Ogorodnikova's house and then here, beside this very bench.

Her legs gave way. She saw spots and collapsed onto the bench. Everything was pitch dark, but her mind was clear. She realized that he, Semyon, had come first, and then there had been Kruzhilin and all the others. Yet none of them, not a single one of all the good people she had come to know, would have known of her existence if not for him. Him!

Everything was pitch dark. Natasha knew that this was because she had her eyes shut. The moment she opened them the blackness would disappear and blinding sunshine and dazzling snow would strike her eyes. And then ... and then she would see Semyon.

She did not see Semyon, but the darkness did indeed vanish.

It was a still, cloudless day. There was a light frost and the air was fresh. Snow crunched underfoot as children swinging school bags scampered by and grown-ups passed. No one paid any attention to Natasha now. The bare branches overhead were black. A column of smoke as pure and white as the snow on the roof rose straight up from the chimney of the house opposite, and beyond that roof

and the roof tops of the other houses she could see the gray crags of snow-covered Zvenigora rising into the clear sky. As Natasha gazed at all this she felt her eyes begin to tear from whiteness of the snow. Warm tears coursed down her cold, flaming cheeks. She also felt that now that she had opened her eyes it was not only the familiar change from darkness to light that every person experiences, which had stunned her, but something unusual and mysterious that had come over her, something that she could never put into words. "It's all because of him. Because of Semyon," she was thinking.

Natasha did not remember returning to the dining room. Passers-by turned to stare after her in wonder, but she did not notice them.

"What's wrong? What happened?" Rufina Ivanovna exclaimed at the sight of her. "You look as if you've seen a ghost! Didn't they give you your pass?"

"It's all on account of Semyon."

"Of who? What is?"

"Here," Natasha said and showed the woman her pass.

"Thank God. Thank God," Rufina Ivanovna repeated.

For some time after Natasha carried in trays of borshch and goulash, unmindful of the people at the tables. Twice she gave someone two portions of goulash and forgot the soup, and kept forgetting to set out the bread. In the end she tripped over her own feet and dropped two plates of food.

Rufina Ivanovna took her behind the partition in the kitchen to a cubbyhole she used as an office and which also contained an iron cot covered with a gray blanket.

"What's the matter, Natasha? Are you sick?"

"I don't know."

"Lie down. Rest up a bit. I'll wait on the others."

Natasha lay there on the cot all through the afternoon, listening to the hum and noise of the kitchen, to the clatter of dishes, the chatter and laughter of the young cooks. In the three or four hours that passed a marked change came over her. Her coal-black eyes became sunken, they burned feverishly, and there were deep rings under them. Her nose seemed sharper, and her face became drawn. When Rufina Ivanovna looked in on her she threw

up her hands and exclaimed,

"You really are sick! "

"No, I'm not," Natasha replied and shook her dishevelled head. Then she asked shyly, "Do you know Semyon Savelyev? "

"Who? Oh, you mean that blond boy? Fyodor's son? "

"Yes. Well, I don't know how it happened. Or how he came into my life. But I love him." She gazed up at the ceiling as she spoke. Rufina Ivanovna stared at her in amazement.

"And he loves me."

"Well, that's fine. But I heard somebody say he was going to marry Vera Iniutina."

Natasha listened intently. She understood everything at last, but the news did not upset or worry her. "Maybe he was. But he loves me now. I know he does." She spoke just as softly and confidently as before. There was a strange forcefulness and truth in the way she said this.

"And when did all this happen? You haven't been here that long."

"It didn't. We haven't even been out on a single date yet."

By now Rufina Ivanovna was more than puzzled. She seemed genuinely upset as she looked at Natasha. "Wait a minute. How do you know he loves you then? I can see where you say you're in love with him. But how do you know he loves you? "

"I could tell just by looking into his eyes. I can see them just as clear as anything. Will you let me off now? I've got to go to him. I can't stay here any longer. May I leave now? He's waiting for me."

"You can't be serious. Where's he waiting for you? "

"There, out in the factory yard. He's come back. I know it. I can tell." She said no more, but got up, put on her coat and went out.

Natasha walked across the factory yard slowly, looking at the ground, paying no attention to the crashing and clanging, the commotion and shouting all around her. She walked around the heaps of mangled metal, steaming slag, yellow clay that had not yet been covered over by the

snow, and broken bricks. She kept walking on and on, as if drawn by some strange force. Rufina Ivanovna, who by now as really worried, followed about a dozen steps behind, trying not to lose sight of Natasha.

At Warehouse No. 8 Natasha stopped and raised her head. The space behind the barbed-wire fence was deserted, if not for the armed guard bundled up in a yellow sheepskin coat. She stood there for a moment and then walked on.

Natasha finally came upon Semyon at the far end of the yard. A group of men and women were breaking up a mound of frozen earth with crowbars and then tossing the heavy clods of clay into the back of a truck. Semyon was in the cab, resting his arms and head on the wheel. He seemed lost in thought, or perhaps he was dozing. He looked up quickly as Natasha approached and jumped down.

"I knew you were here. I knew I'd find you," she said, looking straight into his eyes.

"I've been driving this truck for three days. I took my tractor off to be repaired," he said, as if trying to justify himself.

"No motor can take this kind of a beating," one of the women said angrily. "A motor's not a human being. Go on, you've got a full load."

"Natasha?" It was Maria Firsova. She had appeared from behind the truck and was carrying a spade. "What's the matter? Why'd you come here, dear?"

"Because I knew...." She looked at the woman in the old quilted jacket and worn felt boots who had come up first, then at Maria Firsova, and at the bonfire fed by split boards and crates.

Workers were coming up to the fire to warm their hands. Rufina Ivanovna did, too. Natasha nodded to her, as if in greeting, put her foot on the running board and climbed up into the cab. She looked at the crowd of people around the fire through the thick glass of the windshield. They stood there, looking back at her. Natasha smiled at them, and they seemed to have been waiting for this signal, because they suddenly began to drift away. The bonfire disappeared as well. Now Natasha watched a

jerking yellow brick wall float by, and dirty snow, a wooden fence, the barbed-wire fence, and then snow-covered rooftops showing lavender in the gathering gloom of twilight, bare branches, log walls and blue, pink and green shutters. All of this was now rushing at her, threatening to crash into her, to bury her under the rubble, but it did not. Everything flashed by, faster and faster, making her dizzy.

"Stop! Stop!" she cried, grabbing hold of Semyon, but the moment her hand touched his shoulder she felt as if a bolt of electricity had shot through her, and she was thrown back into her corner of the cab.

Semyon slammed his foot on the brake and then turned to her. "Natasha!"

"Did you know I was going to be there?" Her parched lips barely moved as she spoke.

"No. But I wanted you to." His eyes glittered and his hands gripped the wheel so hard it seemed that he was about to break it off the steering column and toss it out of the cab.

The pounding in her ears made his words unintelligible. Still, she guessed at the meaning of what he had said.

"Oh, Semyon," she whispered and pressed her hot forehead against his shoulder. Only to spring back again and shout angrily, "Let me out! Open the door!"

He leaned across, trying not to touch her, and opened the door. Natasha jumped down into the snow and walked away from the truck. Semyon followed her out. She suddenly stopped and turned back, walking slowly at first, but then quickening her steps. She ran up to him, fell into his arms and embraced him helplessly. Neither of them said a word.

Natasha threw back her head to look at him. She apparently saw what she was searching for in his eyes, for she smiled and walked away, turning into the first side street she came to.

* * *

The dream that had begun towards the end of January continued into February, a month of intermittant bliz-

zards, which ended suddenly in tragedy.

Natasha awoke and fell asleep each day with single name on her lips: Semyon. This was the first conscious sound she heard upon awakening, and as she fell asleep to the sound of it she would smile. The smile still played on her firm, virgin lips as she slept.

First love had come to her so unexpectedly, descending like a downpour upon soil that was parched by a long, dry spell and cracked by the blazing sun. Natasha's heart, which had been completely turned to ice, which had been strained to the breaking point and exhausted, now blossomed eagerly, generously and trustingly, reaching out towards kindness and warmth.

One glittering moonlit night in February Natasha and Semyon were on their way home from the movies, walking slowly down the snow-covered street. Little flocks of girls who were also on their way home from the movies kept passing them. At first, the street had been filled with voices, but they had died away, so that they were now all alone.

There had been a documentary entitled "Red Army Parade on Red Square, November 7, 1941", which was followed by the feature, a war film. Semyon had laughed and joked on the way to community center, and when the lights had been turned down he had immediately found her hand in the dark, but then he had let it go. There was a short break after each reel when the lights went on, but Semyon sat through each break stiffly, staring at the blank screen with knitted brows.

He had not said a word all through the showing and did not speak now. They passed their house in silence. A soft snow began to fall.

"What's the matter, Semyon?" she finally asked and stopped walking. The light from the nearest window fell full on her face, picking out the worried look in her eyes and the glistening snowflakes on her brows.

Semyon had never touched her face before, but now he suddenly took it between his hands. Her own hands flew up to grasp his, but she did not brush them aside. The lights in her eyes trembled.

"I love you," he said softly. "But I'll be leaving soon.

I've volunteered. I can't stay on here. My draft board promised to let me go. This spring, probably."

"So what? I know. But I'll wait for you. As long as I have to. All my life. And spring is still a long way off."

They turned back to the house in silence, walking as slowly as before. Semyon felt that Natasha was worried about something and that she was angry at him for some reason or other.

"Were you ever in love before?" she suddenly asked when they reached the porch.

"I don't know. That's Vera Iniutina's house. We had an understanding. I thought I loved her. But then I realized I didn't. There's nothing to love her for."

"Are you supposed to love somebody for something?"

"Sure."

"Then what do you love me for?"

He did not know what to reply. "I just love you. It's hard to come right out and say why."

"Then why didn't you ever kiss me?" Her voice seemed strange. Her eyes had grown wide, forming nearly perfect circles, and tears glistened in them. She was raising her head higher and higher, having thrown it back and taken a step towards him as she breathed his name. Natasha would have fallen if he had not caught her. Semyon kissed her ear, then her nose and then at last he managed to find her hot, compressed lips. Yet, the moment his lips brushed against hers, she moaned, dashed up the porch steps and began pounding on the door.

"Wait, Natasha."

"Go away! Don't talk to me!" she kept repeating as she pounded on the door.

"I'm coming! Who's there?" she heard Anna saying.

"Natasha!" Semyon pleaded one last time as the door opened. "I'm sorry, Ma. Go on back inside," he said.

"Go away!" Natasha shouted at him.

"What's the matter? Come inside," Anna said anxiously.

Semyon said no more and entered. Natasha fell against his mother in the cold pantry and sobbed as if he had broken her heart.

"I won't wait for him! I can't! I'll go away with him,

to the front lines, into battle, or death or anywhere! Auntie Anna.... Mamma! ”

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” Anna mumbled dazedly, supporting Natasha on one side. “Come inside. I’m very cold here.” She led her into the dark kitchen.

Fyodor turned over in his bed and groaned. “What’s all the commotion about?” he said, cleared his throat and turned on the light. “I said what’s going on here?”

“Go back to sleep. It’s all right,” Anna replied, leading Natasha into the room beyond. She took off the sobbing girl’s coat in the dark and made her lie down beside Ganka, who was fast asleep. Anna pulled up a stool and sat down by the bed. Maria Firsovna looked in on them and asked whether there was anything she could do. Granny Fenya was whispering something from her bed on the high ledge.

“Everything’s all right. Go back to sleep, everybody,” Anna said and stroked Natasha’s trembling shoulder. “And you try to sleep, too.”

“Oh, Mamma, I love him! I love him!” Natasha whispered and pressed Anna’s hand to her cheek.

“Yes, I know. You told me.” Anna sighed, but did not pull her hand away.

Natasha had indeed told them all on that January day when she had at last been issued her pass and had gone looking for and then found Semyon in the factory yard. After he had let her out of the cab she had wandered about Shantara for several hours, without consciously thinking about anything, and had not returned home until late that night. Fyodor, Anna and Maria Firsovna had all been in the kitchen when she had come in and had stopped talking at the sight of her. For a moment she had felt ill-at-ease, but then she had tossed her head and said, “What’re you looking at me like that for? Yes, I love him!”

And she had crossed the kitchen in dead silence, as if running the gauntlet. In passing, she had noticed Anna’s frightened eyes, Fyodor’s appraising look and Maria Firsovna’s guilty expression. She had also noted that Fyodor was tugging at the end of his moustache. Perhaps that was what had made his cheek turn a dark red.

Ever since he had had that same appraising look

whenever he looked at her. Anna, on the other hand, seemed sterner and somehow displeased. She would often look hard at Natasha, but say nothing. Thus it was until this day.

Now Anna sat by the bed and sighed. Then she sighed again.

"Why are you sighing? Is it wrong for me and him...."

"It's wonderful if two people fall in love," Anna said thoughtfully. "But this is wartime."

"What do I care? What do we care?"

"That's so. Love won't ask you whether it's wartime or whether the whole world's topsy-turvy. It just comes to you. The bitterness doesn't set in till later. But when it gets you, it's real bad."

Natasha could not understand why Semyon's mother was saying this. "Don't you want us to...."

"That's not what I meant." Anna freed her hand gently. "But this is what I've been thinking. You know, I sometimes think that happiness is like a garden in the morning. Or, rather, like the birds' voices in that garden. You can hear them everywhere. They're all over, but if you come up close, the bird'll stop singing. It flutters up and away. And it's gone. You can't catch it. Happiness is all around you, so close, but all you see is a bare branch swinging."

"I don't understand. Why d'you say it's gone when it isn't? It isn't! "

"Lord! I really do sound foolish! " Anna said, as though coming to her senses. She got up and added, "Go to sleep. We'll talk it over later."

Beset by troubled thoughts, Natasha had a hard time falling asleep. When she finally did she dreamed of a sun-drenched garden filled with the singing of birds. Then she spotted one on a branch. It was a wondrous bird with emerald-green feathers, but when she approached and stretched forth her hand the bird turned it's little head and pink beak towards her, cocked a brilliant eye at her, exactly like Semyon's father always did, and fluttered off, leaving the empty branch to bob up and down.

The next morning she felt terribly depressed as she walked to her job. Every now and then her lips would

tremble. Near the plant gates she came to with a start from a great roar and rumble. Semyon's tractor was lumbering out of the yard. She rushed towards him, in danger of being run over.

"Are you crazy?" he shouted, jumping down.

A steady stream of workers was passing through the gates. She rushed up to him, embraced him quickly, whispered so that he alone could hear, "Of course there is!" broke away and elbowed her way through the crowd.

This took place in a matter of seconds. There were several exclamations, someone laughed, someone whistled at her receding back, and a few loud remarks followed. Semyon turned back to the cab.

"Hey, Semyon!" It was Yura, looking at him anxiously.

"What d'you want?"

"Did you see what I just saw?"

"Anything else?" He climbed into the cab. The motor roared, the tractor shuddered and rumbled off.

Yura gazed after him in wonder.

"Was that the girl you were boasting about, fellow?" a freckled-faced youth with a broad nose asked him as he nodded towards the door through which Natasha had disappeared.

"Shouldn't have boasted if the other's fellow's outsmarted you," a hoarse voice croaked. "The likes of you should all be off fighting the Germans instead of running around with women here."

"What a sap I am!" Yura muttered, as if the scene he had witnessed had finally sunk in.

Natasha seemed to be living in a dream, in a fog, seeing people on the job, on the street and at home as in a haze.

One day Anton Savelyev, Kruzhilin and Khokhlov dropped into the dining room for lunch.

"Hello there, Natasha," Khokhlov said cheerfully. "I hear you're making out well and everything's fine."

"Yes, everything's fine," she said shyly.

"I'm happy to hear it." He shook both her hands.

Over his shoulder she could see Kruzhilin's gray head and Savelyev's pale, drawn face. Kruzhilin was flipping through the pages of a notepad, but Savelyev was looking

at her and Khokhlov. His eyes were kind, although his face was stern, as though he did not approve of what he was seeing.

Khokhlov rolled over to the table like a ball and said, "Indeed. Sometimes it doesn't take much to save a person. An individual! "

"Given that the person wants to be saved," Savelyev added.

Kruzhilin raised his head and shut his pad. He seemed to be listening to something. Then he said, "In order to want to, he first has to realize that he's perishing. And know what the cause is. That's the part that's usually so hard. So very hard to grasp. Sometimes, it's impossible."

No matter how flustered Natasha felt at the moment, she remembered what he said. Perhaps this was because she was listening so keenly to hear what they were saying about her as she waited on them. But they were no longer speaking about her. They were talking about Yakov Aleinikov, the man with the scar whom she had seen in Kruzhilin's office. They were also discussing Polipov, the former Chairman of the District Executive Committee who had left for active service. Then she heard them mention Fyodor, Yura and Ivan, and strained still harder to overhear them. Were they talking of Savelyev's brothers? But at that very moment a new group entered the dining room and it was filled with the sound of their voices.

One day Natasha bumped into Yelizarov on the street.

"Ah! " he said vengefully. "I was demoted to private on account of you and was nearly packed off to the front lines. But life is full of ups and downs, and don't you ever forget that."

She passed on, ignoring him, for she was neither cowed by his presence or by what he had said. The encounter only served to revive Manya Ogorodnikova, Gvozdev, Zub and Makar Kaftanov and make her wonder what had happened to them and where they were.

She asked Semyon about them that very evening as they were on their way home after work. As if by silent agreement, they turned the corner of the house and continued on to the barn and the small covered haystack

beside it. Semyon embraced her. His lips sought hers hungrily.

After he had forked away some hay to clear a spot near the wall they sat down in the cold, fragrant enclosure. Natasha's head was spinning. Her chest felt constricted from his kisses and the heady aroma of the cold hay.

"You want to know where they are? In jail, awaiting trial." He was silent and then added in an undertone, "Makar Kaftanov's my uncle."

"What? " She laughed.

"He's my mother's brother."

"Her what? "

"Her brother."

"He can't be! He's a bandit." She was breathing rapidly.

"Well, he is," Semyon said in an icy voice. He continued in the same cruel monotone, "And my mother's kulak's daughter. My grandfather, Mikhail Kaftanov, was notorious in these parts. And my mother's his daughter. And Makar's his son. So you see, I'm...."

"What are you saying, Semyon? You don't know what you're saying! "

"Yes, I do."

Neither of them spoke for quite some time.

"That's what life's like. Everything's all mixed up."

"Tell me about it. About everything," she demanded.

"What's there to tell? I don't know any more than what I've told you. Ask my mother. She likes you. Maybe she'll tell you. She never told me, but I have a feeling she'll tell you."

"Yes, I will." Natasha rose. She was stunned.

For several days after she felt depressed and lost. She did not see Semyon. He, too, was trying to keep out of her sight. A struggle was going on inside of her.

"Gracious! What a problem you are! " Rufina Ivanovna kept saying. "First, you were so happy nothing could wipe the grin off your face, and now you look as if you'd been scalded in boiling oil. What's the matter? Did you and Semyon break up or something? "

"No. Nothing like that. I'm just thinking."

"What about? "

"Just in general. About life."

That was all the elder woman could get out of her.

On the night of the accident Natasha went out into the yard late in the evening. A mild breeze did nothing to dispell the dampness, the dark and her loneliness. The bare, wet branches of the trees rustled in the breeze.

A figure appeared on the road ahead.

"Out for a stroll?" she heard Yura say.

"I'm going to meet Semyon. He gets off soon."

"Yes, I know," he said dejectedly. "On second thought, though, I'm glad you...." His voice suddenly took on its old bantering tone and he added, "But don't forget that I'm still around and available." He did not say goodbye.

Yura had not been coming to the dining room of late. Natasha now turned to look after him. He had reached the Iniutins' house and was opening the gate. Then he disappeared. "I'm glad," she said to herself.

She met Semyon near the brightly-lit plant gates, went up to him and pressed against his grimy jacket.

"Don't say anything. Let's just go back."

They held hands as they walked towards the house and, again as if by silent consent, turned the corner to the haystack and made themselves comfortable in their fragrant nook.

"I should go and change," he said when she had snuggled close to him. "My work clothes aren't exactly clean."

"I like the smell." She pressed closer still. "It's your workday smell."

"Did you talk to my mother?"

"Yes. We talked and talked. I'd never have believed she was a partisan, and rode a horse and used a gun. Or that your father was such a brave fighter. I can understand the part about Kruzhillin being a partisan. But not your father. I'm sorry if I've said something wrong."

"You haven't. I can hardly believe it myself. Maybe that's because I don't love him. He's my father, but he's like a stranger to me."

"Where's Mikhailovka Village?"

"Not far from here. Right across Zvenigora."

"Is that where your Uncle Ivan lives? "

"He does now."

"What's he like? "

"He looks like Uncle Anton, except that he's very thin and stoop-shouldered, but his hair and his eyes are the same. You'll see him sooner or later."

"We talked a lot, but there's so much I didn't understand. The part about your grandfather Kaftanov. Did your Uncle Ivan shoot him? "

"I don't know for sure. That's what the talk was." "You know, I have a feeling she was in love with your Uncle Ivan once. Or that he was in love with her."

"I don't know. Pa hates him for some reason or other, but Mother always speaks well of him. She's sorry for him. Maybe they were in love when they were young."

"She once talked about happiness. She said it was like a garden in the morning, that it was like the birds' singing there. She said you see them and hear them, but that if you came close they'd fly away. I thought she was talking about me. About us. But now I know she was talking about herself."

"I know she's not happy. She doesn't love Pa."

The breeze would suddenly turn into a gust of wind, rustling the hay over their heads, though it did not reach into their enclosure. All was still there. They could hear the cow sighing through the thin log wall and the sleepy hens clucking on their roost.

"Everything's so mixed up in life, isn't it? I never thought it could be so confusing." She moved closer and put her arms around him tightly. "I've seen so much sorrow and I've been through so much that I thought nothing could surprise me any more. But actually, I don't know anything. I don't understand anything! " She shook him. "Tell me! Explain things to me! "

"I would if I could." He took her hands in his. "Do you think I understand everything that's going on and everything that happened? But that's what we're here on earth for: to understand the world we live in."

A low, menacing sound that was materializing from nowhere floated over Shantara, becoming ever more frightening as it rolled across the dark, damp sky and was cut

short on a high-sounding note. It was immediately repeated, like a heavy, billowing wave that swept over everything. The sound had not yet ended when another joined it, a high, piercing one that seemed to be growing constantly stronger.

"What's that? What is it? "

"It's the plant. Something's happened! " Semyon sprang to his feet.

"Semyon! "

But he did not even turn around. She, too, climbed out and dashed after him, calling his name. When she reached the street he was far ahead of her. He turned, shouted something and was swallowed up by darkness. Yura ran past her.

"I'll just find out what it is and come back! " he shouted. At that moment Natasha caught sight of Vera Iniutina.

Vera hurried over to her. "What is it? What's happened? "

The wailing siren and the piercing whistles sent an icy chill through them.

"It's an accident! A terrible accident! " Natasha shouted, running off after Semyon and Yura, joining the throngs pouring out of the houses.

* * *

From afar Natasha spotted the bright glow of searchlights over the plant yard. They had always brought a peaceful light to the night sky, but now its edges were tinted a menacing yellow-red, while the northern section of the plant was engulfed in black smoke. "It's a fire! But what's burning? " she wondered anxiously.

Warehouse No 8 or something next to it was on fire. This became clear to her as she approached the gates, for acrid red billows were rising over the warehouse. There was bound to have been a terrible explosion! But where was Semyon? Where was he?

A great and restless crowd had gathered outside the gates and shouting filled the air.

"Get back! Back, everybody! Make way!" someone was shouting above the noise.

Natasha made her way through. She was hot and dishevelled, but when she finally reached the large double gate she saw it opening to let several armed guards pass. They had their rifles at the ready, as if they actually intended to fire into the pressing crowd. One of the guards shouted,

"Make way! Can't you hear me? Fire engines are on their way here from the station. Make way for them!"

The crowd backed off somewhat. At that moment the director made his way through. He was pale and perspiring, and his greatcoat was unbuttoned. He turned to face the crowd, pulled off his fur hat, wiped his damp face with it and shouted, waving his hat as he did:

"Comrades! Comrades! Don't panic! There are enough people inside fighting the fire. Please get out of the way!"

"Anton Silantievich!" Natasha cried, rushing up to him and grabbing his hand. It was trembling. His eyes slid over her face, but he did not seem to recognize her. He pulled his hand away, leaving his fur hat in her hand. Oblivious of this, he ran through the gates, shouting to the guards,

"Don't let anyone in! Move the people away!"

"Come on, back everybody! We don't want anybody to get hurt!" the guards shouted, but the crowd kept pressing forward, straining to pass through the gates. Some men were running along the length of the wooden fence, looking for a place to climb over it, although not many succeeded, for it was very high.

At the sound of the wailing sirens of the approaching fire engines the crowd parted. Three or four red trucks sped through the gates without reducing their speed. The people outside streamed in after them, Natasha was caught up like a chip and carried through the gates. The scene that met her eyes in the factory yard was one of utter confusion. All the workers of the night shift had left their jobs. Restless crowds dashed back and forth among the piles of building materials and the unfinished structures. People were running and shouting, but it was impossible to understand what it was all about. Meanwhile, the factory whist-

les were still shrilling eerily. "Why don't they stop? Why are they still blowing?" Natasha's whole being protested. At that very moment she hit against something soft and tumbled into the snow.

"Not the ladder! Just use the hooks!" someone was shouting. Then she heard someone breathing hard.

A middle-aged man whom she barely recognized as Savchuk was standing beside her. The play of reflected light on his cheek made it seem as though he were winking.

"What are you doing here? You'll get crushed to death and it won't be anybody's fault," he rasped. "Get out of here this minute!"

"What's burning?"

"The carpentry shop. Number 8's right next to it, and sparks are flying over it."

"Who's flying? How'd it start?"

"It's a good thing the wind's soft. We've got to save the warehouse. If we don't...." Savchuk seemed to be speaking to himself. Then he shouted, "I said don't use anything but your hooks!"

The whistles finally stopped blowing. Men carrying grappling hooks ran by her. She was still sitting in the snow, feeling relieved that it wasn't the warehouse after all. But the carpentry shop was right next to it. "What if it catches fire?" She was again gripped by fear.

Natasha didn't know what to do, nor why she had tried so frantically to get into the factory yard. Of what help could she be? She was no longer thinking about Semyon and had, in fact, put him out of her mind completely. Then she realized she was holding a man's fur hat, but did not know how she had come to be in possession of it.

Natasha was later unable to recall in detail all that followed. She would remember the huge crowd standing in a helpless semicircle around the blazing torch of the carpentry shop. Actually, the huge wooden barn that had housed it was now a charred ruin. When Natasha had approached the fire, a great column of sparks had shot up as the roof of the carpentry shop had collapsed. Natasha had glimpsed the flaming log walls and the stacks of empty

shell crates which crackled and burned with an intense heat. Several firemen had trained their hoses on the walls and crates, but the streams of water seemed only to increase the blaze. Then she recalled the director, whose wet clothes were smoking, and Semyon suddenly appearing from the very heart of the fire. They were dragging the lifeless body of Nechayev, the chief engineer, whose clothes were black and charred.

"You're crazy!" Savelyev shouted after they had laid Nechayev on the ground. "The roof might have collapsed on top of you!" His hair was tangled, and dirty streams of sweat trickled down his face.

"Stop pouring water on Number 8," Nechayev choked the words out. He tried to raise himself up, but moaned and fell back.

"Fyodor! Fyodor!" Savelyev called, shaking him gently. "If we don't keep the hoses on it, the warehouse'll catch fire."

The carpentry shop and the warehouse were set at right angles, with their short sides practically touching. Several firemen played their hoses on the buckling shingle roof and the black side of the wooden warehouse. Natasha, too, could see that if they did not, the warehouse was certain to catch fire, even before the roof of the carpentry shop began to burn.

"Then ... then cut off the third cable!" Nechayev ordered feebly, straining terribly to raise himself up again. "Immediately!" His face was covered with blisters, and the skin hung in shreds on his cheeks.

"Which cable? Where is it? What's it for, Fyodor?" Savelyev demanded, dropping to his knees to hear the reply.

Semyon stood beside them, pressing hand to his cheek and wincing as though he had a toothache.

"I found out what started the fire. It was the electric wiring. The wall froze, and then thawed." Nechayev was speaking in gasps. "The dampness caused a short-circuit. The wiring in Number 8's no good, either. It was all done in such a rush. If the water soaks through the roof and gets to it, it'll.... And if the wiring starts to burn.... Switch off the third cable! Immediately! The third cable! It's over

there, in the transformer pillar. Wait, I'll...." He got to his knees and tried to straighten up, but groaned and toppled head-first into the trampled snow.

Just then a shout went up, as if to echo his words:

"Number 8's on fire! "

The crowd, of which Natasha was a part, lurched away, leaving her alone beside Savelyev, Semyon and Nechayev. She smiled wanly and held out the director's hat to him, but he saw neither the hat nor Natasha. He was staring dully at the warehouse. She followed his gaze, but all she saw were the firemen, with their hoses trained on Number 8. She thought smoke was rising from the roof and walls, not knowing that it was steam. "Where's it burning? It's not burning," she was thinking. Someone shouted,

"It's burning inside! "

Then only did she see the black snakes of smoke shooting out between the cracks of the iron-bound warehouse doors like jets of steam from under the lid of a boiling kettle. Savchuk's stooped figure and another, very familiar shape appeared by the doors, framed in the light of the fire.

"Get away! It's about to blow! " someone screamed.

Natasha tried to run, but her legs had turned to jelly, for she had recognized the second shape. It was Semyon. She had no idea how he could have got there so quickly. He was battering the doors with a crowbar, trying to knock off the lock, which he succeeded in doing, for a moment later they swung open of their own accord. A black cloud rolled out, making first Savchuk and then Semyon back away. However, the very next moment, with Savchuk in the lead and Semyon following once again, they rushed into the smoke-filled warehouse. They ran out again, doubled over and coughing uncontrollably, and fell into the snow. A moment later Semyon was back on his feet. He grabbed the discarded crowbar and was off.

All this had taken place in a matter of seconds. The sound of someone shouting: "Number 8's on fire! " had brought Nechayev back to his senses. He braced his hands on the ground and started to rise.

"That's what I was afraid of," he said as Savchuk and

Semyon ran into the warehouse and out again. "What're they doing? They'll be asphyxiated! All they've got to do is switch off the power! Anton! We've only got a few seconds left! "

Savelyev did not react to his words. He stood as in a daze, staring at the warehouse.

"What's the matter with him? Why doesn't he do anything? " Natasha wondered.

No sooner had the sentences formed in her mind than Nechayev said with apparent relief, "There! He's gone to the transformer pillar. He's a smart boy, your nephew is. He's got to make it! " All of a sudden, his voice rising to a frantic shout, he shrilled, "He's not protected! And he doesn't know which switch to pull! There's six thousand volts there! Six thousand..." he moaned and sank back into the snow.

This last phrase seemed to awaken Savelyev from his state of stupor. "Where the hell's that damned cable? " he demanded, shaking Nechayev. "Which one is it? "

"Over there...." Nechayev managed as he drifted away into unconsciousness, or perhaps even death. "Hurry! Every second counts. Everything'll go up...."

He said no more.

Natasha was later to recall running after Savelyev, repeating Nechayev's words to herself: "He's got to make it! Everything'll blow! Six thousand volts! He's not protected! " These words did not seem to threaten any of them, any of the people now running towards the transformer pillar, but only Semyon, her Semyon among all others! Every cell in her body was aware that he was now alive, but that in another moment he might be struck dead.

"Semyon! " she cried, overtaking other people who were also running. She ran up to the transformer pillar. An electric bulb was swaying in the wind, suspended from an overhead wire. By the light of the bulb she first saw the menacing white skull on the iron door of the pillar and then Semyon spinning around to face her. "Semyon! " she cried again.

"Shut up! What're you screaming about? " he yelled, glaring at her with eyes that were angry and alien. He turned back to the door of the transformer pillar and

began battering it with his crowbar. His right cheek was black and swollen.

The frightening white skull, Semyon's hostile eyes and, finally, his words were like blows raining down upon her in quick succession. She shuddered at each of them, backed away and felt she was falling. Someone caught her, tossed her aside and came between Semyon and her.

"His face is all scorched!" she was thinking.

"Get away! Hear me?" it was Savelyev shouting beside her. This was followed by the sound of a crowbar striking the iron door again. Then the iron hinges creaked. Next she heard Semyon's frightened voice pleading,

"Uncle Anton! Uncle!"

Natasha lurched in the direction of his voice, just in time to see a great sheaf of fiery sparks issue from the open pillar. A blinding flash lit up the dark interior for an instant, revealing the curved ribs of the transformer, that huge grinning monster. Then silence enveloped all.

"Uncle Anto-on...." the words resounded inside her head, but she could not understand whether this was Semyon shouting again or whether it was the echo of his shout impressed upon her brain.

"If he's shouting again it means he's alive," she said to herself, as if she were thinking abstractly of just anyone, and not her Semyon. She was surprised to find herself sitting in the snow.

The light had gone out over the pillar. Everything was dark. The people nearby were huddled in a group. A woman sobbed. A man was saying,

"Maybe it'll still be all right. Stop crying."

A movement went through the crowd. Then it surged towards the transformer pillar.

"Step aside. I'll carry him out," she heard Semyon say.

"But he's been killed. How can he be talking?" She stood up.

Then she spotted him in the beam of a flashlight. He was carrying someone out of the pillar. He laid the body on the ground. That meant Semyon was all right. He was alive. Yet, she still could not grasp this fact. Nor could she understand who the person lying on the snow was. He, too, was lit by the beam of the flashlight. He had on a

greatcoat, but no hat. His face was charred, and his arms were burned black to the shoulder.

"Dad! Father! " It was Yura, whose jacket was also badly burned, making his way through the huddled figures. He stopped dead in his tracks. Kruzhilin came running up. He was out of breath. Khokhlov's exhausted face appeared beside him.

"Number 8's out of danger now," Khokhlov reported hastily. "What's the matter here? Anton Silantyeovich? Anton...."

Kruzhilin and Khokhlov both bent over Savelyev. Then both men slowly straightened up again. Yura, on the contrary, suddenly sank to the ground. He lay crumpled beside his father's body.

"Mother.... She'll never survive," he sobbed and his back began to heave.

Savelyev's body gave off a sickly-sweet smell. Natasha recalled that the charred bodies of the victims killed when their train had been bombed had smelled like this. Now, at last, she understood what had happened. She would have lost consciousness if not for the sudden joy that was welling up somewhere deep inside her, spreading warmth throughout her body as it formed into words: "It's not him. It's not Semyon. He's alive. Alive! "

She knew this joy was worse than blasphemy, insulting to all those gathered around her and to herself, as well. But it was there and she could do nothing to squelch it.

"How'd it happen? " she asked dazedly, going over to Semyon and then collapsing into his arms. "You're alive! Alive! " She began to sob loudly, feeling that every one was now aware of the joy she felt and damned her, and would henceforth damn her, for it.

No one was. They heard someone sobbing, but did not know who it was. The small crowd huddled around the body in silence.

* * *

No one in Fyodor Savelyev's house, including Natasha, slept that night, or the one after, or the following day,

except Fyodor himself. He would come home from work, go to bed with his face to the wall as usual, and in the morning he would rise bleary-eyed and with a crumpled moustache. He would leave for the machine and tractor station without his breakfast and without saying a word to anyone. Anna was hardly ever at home these days, for she spent her days and nights with Anton's widow, Liza, who had fainted at the news of her husband's death and had been under constant medical care since then.

Natasha did not go to work, for Rufinā Ivanovna had chased her home when she had appeared at the dining room as usual the morning after the fire. Semyon, too, was at home, as was Maria Firsovna, who now cared for both families, cooking their meals in silence, feeding the subdued children and packing them off to school. Semyon, whose face was covered with dressings, stayed in bed for two days, staring up at the ceiling, his thoughts miles away. Natasha had lost all sense of time. She wandered about the house aimlessly. Strangers came to speak to Maria Firsovna and then left. Once Yura showed up. He entered, stood by the door and then went over and sat down on one of the beds. He had become thin and was frightening to look at.

"I can't bear it at home any more," he said, dropped his head onto the footboard and wept.

"Lie down. Come, lie down," Maria Firsovna coaxed.

"Lie down, Yura," Natasha repeated.

He raised his tear-stained face and shook his head. A few moments later Vera Iniutina rushed in, spoke rapidly to him and led him off by the hand like a child.

The following day Natasha saw a tall, thin man wearing a sheepskin coat and carrying a whip who strangely resembled the dead director. The man entered the kitchen and, after greeting everyone, said to her,

"Who are you? "

"Hello, Uncle Ivan," Semyon said, coming into the kitchen. "This is Natasha."

"Ah, I've heard about you," he said just as dourly and sat down.

"And I've heard about you, too," she replied.

He smiled unpleasantly. Natasha sensed that he had

misunderstood her, so she hastened to add, "I heard about your life." She became utterly confused.

Everyone was silent. Ivan sat hunched over on the stool, his head lowered, revealing his thinning blond hair.

"How'd it happen?" he asked in an undertone.

"Who can say now?" Semyon replied. "There was a switch in the transformer pillar that had to be pulled, and Uncle Anton didn't know which one it was. So he pressed the crowbar against all the switches in the box, short-circuiting them all."

"Wasn't there any other way? Couldn't they have been yanked out or something?"

Semyon touched the side of his face and winced. "That's what I said. You can't really explain anything now. It had to be done quickly. In a second. The wiring in the ammunition dump was beginning to melt. In another minute the whole plant would have blown up. There were six thousand volts there, and you had to be protected. And Uncle Anton was soaking wet from the hoses, on top of everything. And he must've decided then that he had to be sure he'd get the right one."

"What about you? Weren't you soaking wet too? Did you know which switch to pull?" Natasha shouted unexpectedly.

"What's she talking about?" Ivan asked.

"She needs to get some sleep," Semyon said, went over to her, and took her hot hand. "You haven't slept for two nights." He led her out of the kitchen, and over to her bed. She let him undress her and then laid down.

"But you wanted to, too. You were going to press the crowbar against the switches!" she cried, grabbing his hand as he was about to leave the room. "If the director hadn't shoved you out of the way, if he hadn't snatched the crowbar from you...."

"No, I didn't."

"You're lying! You were the first to run to the pillar! And you were soaked to the skin. And you didn't have any idea which switch to pull." Her eyes bored into him, demanding an answer.

"It's the truth, Natasha. I wasn't going to." Semyon pulled a chair over with his foot and sat down by her bed.

"You had no idea which switch it was," she persisted.

"I couldn't understand why he got burned to death, and not you. And I still think ... I still can't believe...." She could not go on, for tears were choking her. Neither of them had noticed Ivan standing in the doorway, listening to what they were saying.

Natasha sobbed loudly several times, sighed deeply and fell silent. She had fallen asleep instantly.

"I'll be going before your pa comes back and catches me here. Agata and me'll be at the funeral tomorrow," Ivan said.

Semyon saw him to the gate.

As Ivan got into his sleigh he looked at his nephew questioningly. "Did you know how to cut the power?"

"No."

"What would you've done if Anton hadn't shoved you out of the way?"

"I don't know. You won't believe me, but I really don't."

"But you ran over to that pillar, didn't you? You must have had something in mind, didn't you?"

Semyon shrugged. "It's all like something that happened in a dream. I'm not sure of anything any more."

Ivan gathered up the reins slowly. "What about Natasha? Are you aiming to marry her?"

Something rose up in protest in Semyon's soul at these words. "I'm not thinking about marriage! We hardly know each other. And besides.... She's a very wonderful person, but she's an orphan, and she's seen enough trouble as it is."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'll be going off to the army sooner or later. And what if I.... What right have I got to ruin her life?"

"So that's it. Well, I guess you know what you're doing. There's all kinds of women, you know. One'll be broken for life if she's widowed, and another if she sees that her man doesn't believe in her love for him."

"You sound as if you're telling me to go ahead and get married, Uncle Ivan. Why, you don't even know her."

"I'm not telling you to do anything. I don't even know why I'm saying all this. But I can see she loves you like

very few women love a man."

"Don't, Uncle Ivan. Think of what we're talking about. At a time like this."

"You're right. This is the wrong time to talk about marriage, but that's life. Just as one person's dying, another's being born. It's always been like that. That's why life goes on."

After Ivan had driven off Semyon was left with an uneasy feeling of guilt over a conversation he considered to be out of place at such a terrible time. If anyone were to say to him now that on the morrow, the day of Anton Savelyev's funeral, something still more inappropriate would take place, for he would leave home and become Natasha's husband, he would have said that the person was insane.

Yet, life decreed that this would be so.

* * *

Anton Savelyev was buried in the garden of the Fallen Soldiers of the Revolution Square on Sunday, March 2nd. The small square around the garden was crowded. The crowd stirred and murmured.

It was a clear, sunny day. Birds in the branches of the trees around the square were chirping joyously at the sudden thaw. The snow sparkled. It seemed strange to see so many people gathered here, the pit dug beside the tall wooden obelisk, and the frozen clods of black earth scattered on the white snow.

Semyon and Natasha stood by the obelisk railing, staring at the black clods of earth.

The funeral strains of a band could be heard in a distance. A moment later stillness gripped the throng. Kruzhilin, Savchuk and several other men were approaching, carrying the open coffin. "Nechayev's not here. Will he pull through?" Natasha wondered. The chief engineer was in a coma in the hospital.

Natasha stood by the railing all through the funeral. The coffin was set on a bench beside the grave. People stood in a semicircle around it. She glimpsed Yura and, to

her surprise, Semyon's father, his Uncle Ivan and, finally, Semyon. She had not noticed him leaving her side to approach the coffin.

Kruzhilin, hat in hand, began to speak. She only heard snatches of what he was saying.

"Anton Savelyev loved life. He loved his fellow-men.... His arrests in tsarist times, exile, hard labor and prisons only served to strengthen this love, because he knew what he was living for, in the name of what.... If he were to be granted another life on earth he would have lived it in exactly the same way. He would have chosen death as unhesitatingly as he did in order to save the lives of others ... in the name of life and his fellow-men...."

The sun shone in the chill sky, casting a dazzling light upon the cliffs of Zvenigora. The birds went on trilling in the treetops, oblivious of the crowd below. Natasha felt dizzy from their singing and the blinding sun and snow. She gripped the cold railing to steady herself. "But do I love life?" she suddenly asked herself. "Of course I do. Despite everything that's happened! After Daddy was arrested and Mother was killed, and everything else that happened, I suddenly thought.... No, I loved life even then. I was desperate, I couldn't understand why life was treating me so cruelly. I was so lost and so desperate I...." Her thoughts broke off at this point, leaving nothing but a blank.

"Ivan Mikhailovich Subbotin will speak on behalf of the Regional Party Committee," Kruzhilin was saying.

Subbotin, white-haired and bone-dry, spoke in a soft, sad voice. Natasha listened intently, hoping and waiting for the void to disappear, but it did not.

"...Life is still devilishly difficult and complex, and sometimes very cruel.... Anton Savelyev possessed the gift of seeing through these difficulties and complexities, and of understanding the true sources of life, based on such fundamental concepts as justice and happiness...."

Indeed, she, for one, knew how difficult and cruel life could be. But where were life's true sources, where was its justice and happiness? These were very fine words, and she even believed in them, but even so, she did not know where those sources lay. She had often asked herself a

question to which she could never find an answer: what, then, did people live for on this earth?

Subbotin seemed to have guessed what she was thinking, for he said, as if mocking her, "But where are these sources? Many, alas, many do not see them. Where are they then?"

Natasha shuddered and gripped the railing more tightly.

"They are within the person himself. Within every person. But many do not understand this or cannot understand it for the better part of their lives. Perhaps it's because the human mind is not all that perfect as yet. Herein lie the reasons for misfortune, tragedy and, at times, much grief."

His words were falling into the void in front of her, filling it with something that seemed to be tangible.

"...When people say that Anton Savelyev knew what he was living for they mean that he lived to help others live, to help people see these true sources of life in themselves."

Natasha stood there for a few more moments. Then she walked off, her head bowed. The people made way for her, thinking she was weeping.

She did not remember coming home or entering the house. Fyodor was already back from the funeral. He was seated at the bare table and glanced at her dourly as she entered and crossed the kitchen quickly to her room. Granny Fenya asked her a question, but she did not reply. She took off her coat and lay down.

Indeed, how simple it all was: to live in order to help others live! How simple! And yet, how difficult to understand. She should have, though. So many people had helped her, each in his own way. Anton Silantyevich had, and Anna Mikhailovna, and Maria Firsovna. Why did such a tragedy have to happen in order that this truth be brought home to her? How difficult it all was, and how simple. How silly she was to have just been thinking that though she believed in the fine words Subbotin was saying, she had never yet seen the true and just sources of life and could not see its joy. But what of her own life? What of Semyon and her love for him? How could she have for-

gotten that? Were these not sources? Besides.... Although she had not sought these sources in herself. Now Subbotin had opened her eyes. He had said that one should seek them in one's self. Still, what were the true sources of life, the ones that were to be found in one's self?

She could not really understand this. Her thoughts were becoming more and more jumbled until they finally engulfed her, like a huge wave engulfs a person at sea.

She suddenly felt the lack of fresh air acutely. She wanted to see Semyon that very minute. How could she have left him all alone beside the graveside? She threw on her coat and went into the kitchen, where she came up against the hard eyes of the master of the house.

"Why do you always look at me like that?" she cried angrily for what was probably the first time she had ever spoken to him.

He did not reply. Perhaps it was because he had no chance to, as the door opened just then and Semyon entered. The dressing had been removed, revealing his blackened cheek.

"What's going on here?" He looked from his father to Natasha.

"It's a merry-go-round," Fyodor replied in a rage. "There's never anything to eat on time and no place to rest. Where's your mother?"

"You know Aunt Liza's in a very bad state. I was just there." Semyon was unbuttoning his jacket.

"It's a merry-go-round, that's what it is!" Fyodor rose, making the floorboards creak.

"What do you mean? What are you saying?" Natasha demanded.

"Look at the chippie chirping," Fyodor said and smiled sarcastically. He sat down again.

She was not offended by his calling her a chippie. What shocked her was his behavior. "But your brother just died!"

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

Natasha backed away. She looked at Semyon helplessly.

He was holding his jacket, as if wondering whether to hang it up or put it back on. He finally hung it up and advanced slowly towards his father, who was looking at

him with amusement. The closer Semyon came the narrower the slits of Fyodor's eyes became.

"I want you to apologize to Natasha," Semyon said. His voice was calm enough, but his hands had begun to tremble.

"You sure you don't want me to get down on my knees while I'm at it? "

"You mean you won't? " Semyon's hands curled into fists.

"Well. You seem ready to hit your own father. Is that it? "

"N-no." Semyon suddenly went limp inside. "No." He strode over to the door, snatched his jacket off the peg, put it on hastily, grabbed Natasha's hand and pulled her out of the house.

The sun was shining as brilliantly as before, although it was now moving beyond Shantara, casting sharp black shadows on the white snow. Ganka and Dima were standing by the house. Dima was talking, making Ganka giggle and laugh. At the sight of Semyon and Natasha she stopped laughing and slipped around the corner, dragging Dima off as well.

Semyon had practically run outside. He stopped outside the gate and was gulping the cold air. Usually soft-spoken and calm, he was unrecognizable now. Even his face had become angular and drawn in these few moments, while his thoughtful gray eyes had an angry glint.

"Ma'll understand. She'll understand," he said, although the meaning of his words was not at all clear to Natasha. "Come on."

"Where to? "

"I don't know. Let's go."

About fifteen minutes later they came to a halt beside a snow-covered cottage which seemed strangely familiar to her. Semyon knocked.

"Who's there? Wait a minute," an old woman's voice called out.

Natasha recognized the voice immediately. She knew where they were now, but could not understand why they had come.

A minute later she was standing in the middle of a

fairly large room, while old Granny Akulina cackled on as she fussed about her, her bony fingers helping Natasha to unbutton her coat.

"Goodness! I couldn't imagine who it was that'd come calling. What a surprise! And I was beginning to wonder why you never came around to see me. I heard you were living with the Savelyevs. Manya Ogorodnikova told me. Just look at the crowd she's mixed up with! She said she didn't want to, but there she is, all the same. And she keeps crying all the time. They're going to put those men on trial, and she's to be a witness. She says they'll put her in jail, too, being as your Makar kept all the stuff he'd stolen out at her place." This last sentence was addressed to Semyon. "She says nobody knows about that part of it, but she's going to tell the court anyway. I told her she'd be a fool to do that."

"Makar's last name is Kaftanov, Granny. We're Savelyevs," Semyon said.

"Yes, natur'ly. Everybody knows that. The Good Lord should've taken that lost sheep unto Himself to end all his troubles. But Manya keeps saying she'll tell them. How nice it is to see you both. I've been ailing all this time, Natasha dearie. Can't even manage to go outside. How about some tea? I'll put up the samovar in a jiffy."

"We haven't come to visit, Granny. We'd like to stay on here as boarders. Will you take us in?" Semyon asked.

"What? Oh, I see. You've gone and got married, is that it?"

"No. I just left home."

"What do you mean?" Natasha exclaimed.

"I can't live there any more, and I can't leave you there." He put his hands on her thin shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"But, Semyon, how can we? What'll people say? I don't understand."

"Maybe I don't, either. But this is how it's got to be. I'll go and tell Ma now, and bring back some clothes. Will you let us stay, Granny? We'll pay you for our room."

"What're you talking about? It won't be so lonely here with you for company, and that's payment enough." She blinked her bleary old eyes and added, "Seems a bit

strange, though. Who are you if you're not husband and wife?"

"We'll figure that out by morning," Semyon said.

* * *

Natasha was not the only one who was beset by troubling questions about the meaning of life and human existence after the death of Anton Savelyev.

Several weeks had elapsed since the funeral. There had been no blizzards in all this time, although it had often snowed heavily, so that the area around the obelisk, trampled by thousands of feet during the funeral, was once again covered with soft snowdrifts.

Downy snow-caps topped the posts of the railing around the obelisk. Snow hung in heavy shreds from the branches of the maples, poplars and acacia trees. It glittered on clear, sunny days when the trees seemed powdered with sundust and the titmice trilled incessantly in the branches.

The square was still, deserted and white. A small tin pyramid for a marker adorned the grave of Anton Savelyev and seemed so small beside the huge, star-topped wooden obelisk. A fresh path led through the billowing snowdrifts to the small grave.

Fyodor knew that Liza visited her husband's grave every evening. He had spotted her there several times on his way home from work. She would stand by the grave in her worn rabbit coat with her hands tucked into her little muff and her lips drawn in sternly as she gazed at the snow-covered mound and the star brushed by hoarfrost that adorned the small obelisk.

It was the middle of March. The days were warm, and in the mornings grey-pink fog drifted over the Gromotukha, a harbinger of the first spring thaws. Towards evening, however, a frost would usually set in, while the nights were as bitterly cold as in December. One and the same song was often broadcast over the outdoor loudspeaker and was carried across the cold rooftops and through the narrow streets and lanes of Shantara:

*We'll not flinch in the fight
For our capital fair,
Moscow's dear to the hearts of her sons.
With a wall made of steel,
In defense of our soil
We will silence the enemy's guns.*

The music was solemn and stern, it was harsh, and the words fell heavily, like paving stones. Fyodor felt they were crashing down upon Shantara. He wondered how they did not crush the roofs.

Actually, though, he was indifferent to all this. He had, of late, perhaps from the time Anfisa had put him out of her house for good, or perhaps it was after that, when Semyon had left home with that refugee brat Natasha, or perhaps much before, dating from the one and only time he had sat at his brother Anton's table one evening long ago been existing in a void. He ate, slept, went off to work and spoke to people, but it was as if another man were going through the motions and none of it had anything to do with Fyodor. All the men of his age in the village had gone off to war, while he and several other tractor drivers had been deferred. He was not worried about being called up, but was not happy about his deferment, either.

Fyodor was not even moved by the death of his elder brother. During the funeral he had come up to the open coffin and gazed calmly and indifferently at Anton's face burned black by the bolt of electricity. Snowflakes had settled on the charred face and had not melted.

"Anton Savelyev loved life. He loved his fellow-men," Polikarp Kruzhilin was saying sadly at the graveside, barely managing to speak at all. "He knew what he was living for."

It had seemed to Fyodor then that he had heard those words before, but he could not recall where or when. Perhaps his memory had been blurred by the sudden wail of the brass band and then by the dull thudding of frozen clods of earth falling upon the coffin.

He recalled this the following morning when Anna had come home. He glanced at her and saw that her face was as dark as if she, too, had been jolted by electricity. At that

very moment he thought he could hear her saying, as she once had, "Ivan was right when he said you don't love anybody. Not me, or the children, or our way of life, or anything.... What are you living for?"

The words spoken by Kruzhilin and by Anna before him would give Fyodor no peace.

"He knew what he was living for."—"What are you living for?"

You'd think Polikarp and Anna had been plotting together! The two voices, one a man's, the other a woman's, hammered at his brain, demanding something of him. But what? What was he supposed to say in reply?

There was no answer. All there was was this void, and his former indifference to everything. All that was happening seemed to be taking place far, far away, in a different world: the song he had heard so many times, the news of the Germans' being routed at the approaches to Moscow, the fire at the plant, Anton's death, Semyon leaving home, Anna saying that she was joining the collective farm, a conversation with someone or other about Polipov being off to war and Khokhlov, a roly-poly little fellow and one of the evacuees, taking his place as Chairman of the District Executive Committee, the rumors about tractor and combine drivers having been deferred only until the spring sowing was completed, since about fifty women and girls were now attending mechanic's courses at the machine and tractor station. All these events were jumbled in his mind so that he did not know which followed which in sequence.

One day Anna told him that Semyon and Natasha were now officially married. Fyodor's reaction had been rather strange.

"Never mind. They'll call him up all the same." And then he added sarcastically, "How come they haven't called up your dear friend Ivan? His year's been called up long ago."

Anna flashed him a look of hatred and replied, "They'll take him when they need him."

"I heard he's in the hospital. How come?"

"He was carting hay and caught pneumonia. In both lungs."

"He's a smart fellow! "

Ivan was released a week after this conversation. As Fyodor was returning to work after lunch he ran into his brother on the street. Ivan was as sallow and thin as if he'd just risen from the grave.

"The war isn't over yet, so you'll have to find something else to put you back in the hospital," Fyodor said.

Ivan smiled as he squinted in the bright sun and replied, "What d'you know? Not a single louse has said a word so far, so I have to bump into you."

At which they parted.

* * *

The sun was setting. The blue shadows cast by the low shops and buildings of the machine and tractor station crept along the packed but still fresh snow.

A staff meeting was in progress in the clubroom, called to discuss "speeding up repairs and preparing the machinery for sowing", as it said in the announcement Fyodor had seen that morning.

Kruzhilin had come to the meeting, but he had not mentioned the affairs of the machine and tractor station so far.

Instead, he was telling them about the situation at the front lines. He said that the Germans had been driven eighty, a hundred and in some places even two hundred kilometers and more from Moscow; that they were being pursued farther; that the Government had adopted a decision early in March on the 1942 spring sowing in Moscow, Leningrad, Kalinin, Tula, Oryol and Kursk regions, all of which might yet be completely liberated by the beginning of the sowing. However, he said that the situation was grave, for Leningrad was blockaded and the Germans were pressing towards the Volga and the Caucasus.

Fyodor had a seat by the window, from where he watched the long blue shadows. Kruzhilin's speech reached him through a haze, as if his ears had been stopped up with cotton.

Still, the now ever-present "He knew what he was

living for" and "What are you living for?" kept pounding at his head.

"Indeed. What for?" he suddenly wondered. "And how?" He frowned and clenched his teeth so hard his jaws began to ache. He strained his memory until he heard a ringing in his ears, as if through superhuman effort alone he could recall all of his past life down to the last detail, could see it all at a glance, as from some great height. Yet, he could recall nothing except the last time he had gone to see Anfisa and had returned home to find Ivan there. Actually, he did not so much remember Anfisa as Ivan and his own conversation with Anna after Ivan had gone. This he remembered in toto, every little inflection of her voice, every word they had spoken.

"So you've decided to leave me? Is that why you've gotten so bold all of a sudden? You were even going to have Ivan stay over."

"And I will leave you. I can't take this life any more."

"You're all worked up. You're not going anywhere. And let's call it a day."

"But I will! I will! You've drained all the life-blood out of me. Ivan was right when he said what he did about you. He said you don't love anybody, not me, or the children, or our way of life, or anything. And you probably don't even love yourself! Then what are you living for? What for?"

"This sounds interesting. Anything else? Or is that all?"

"And you only wanted to marry me, because you wanted to inherit all my father's riches and then ... then have orgies at the retreat like he did."

"This really is interesting. Ha-ha. I married you in 1919, when I was a partisan. By then there wasn't a scrap of your riches left."

"That's the way things turned out. But I said you wanted to, meaning before. You were in love with Anfisa. You even were living with her then, but you wanted to marry me. And the fact that there wasn't a scrap of our riches left, well, that's what's been eating at you like a maggot all your life."

"Shut up, if you don't know what you're talking about!"

"I do know! You're sorry for my father, for Ivan having shot him. And that's what you hate Ivan for, for coming to his sense and going over to the partisans when he understood whose side stood for the truth. You've been taking it out on him all your life, because you can't take it out on anybody else. Or are you afraid to? Nobody knows about this part of you, but I do. And now Ivan's finally understood what you're really like, too. You might as well know he's your mortal enemy now."

"Shut up, you! "

Polikarp Kruzhilin was muttering about something or other as he paced up and down in front of the long table covered over with a red cloth, tossing his head every now and then as if he were butting the air.

Fyodor was thinking: "Yes, she spoke the truth then. Not all of what she said was so, but there was some truth in it. Take what she said about Anfisa, now. How'd she put it? 'You were in love with Anfisa, you were even living with her then, but you wanted to marry me.' "

That part of it was right. A month or two after Demian Iniutin had given him forty rubles they were reaping Kaftanov's rye field near Zvenigora. Fyodor had earned the money. All through the harvesting Anfisa had worked along with the women, reaping and binding the rye into sheaves. Fyodor had brought the women food to the fields, water from the river and had kept an eye on them to make sure they were binding the shocks tightly and setting them up in stacks correctly and to see that no one was shirking on the job. In a word, he had been placed there as an overseer in charge on the women.

"Well? " Iniutin would inquire every now and then as his seemingly mild, watery eyes bore through Fyodor. "You think I put you here in this easy job for nothing? "

"How can I? " Fyodor would reply, turning his head to avoid Iniutin's eyes. "Her mother's right there next to her all the time. She never lets her out of her sight."

Even though he had turned away, he had noted Iniutin's eyes getting smaller and sharper. After Iniutin had transferred Anfisa's mother to a distant spot, Fyodor said,

"She's awfully shy. You said not by force. Give me time."

But it was not a matter of her mother or of Anfisa's being shy. She was not at all afraid of him. True, the first time Fyodor met her in the village upon his return from the taiga she blushed. However, she had stood her ground, as if she were ready to burn to a cinder on the spot.

"What's the matter? Do I look funny or something?" he asked.

"Yes. You look like a dragon with that moustache," Anfisa replied, stuck out her pin tongue at him and ran off.

Fyodor shaved off his moustache. When he again met Anfisa her thick lashes fluttered, she blushed, then turned on her heel and hurried off. Several days later, coming upon him in the field, she turned pink again and whispered,

"You know, you were better-looking with a moustache." She giggled into her fist and skipped off like a child.

Soon she was no longer shy in his presence and often teased him. She might drop a prickly stalk down the back of his shirt or, when he had dozed off in the shade of a stack, she might creep up, crouch beside him and tickle his face with a blade of grass. She was forever laughing and giggling, and when she did tiny creases appeared on the bridge of her nose, and her round eyes would dance mischievously.

His sudden passion for buxom young Anfisa was both unwanted and uncontrollable. It was a strange feeling, one that was somewhat paternal. He thought he would rid himself of it if he did what Iniutin had paid him to do and finally made up his mind to after warning Iniutin once again,

"If there's any noise about it and... you know, I expect you to come forward and stand up for me. 'Cause if you don't, I'm not going to keep my mouth shut. I'll say you paid me to."

"Don't you worry your head about that, my boy! I'll stop anyone's throat up with this here peg leg of mine. So don't you worry, boy."

There was no noise. Anfisa understood from the start what it was Fyodor wanted, but she did not shout or put up any resistance. She tried pleading with him.

"Don't Fyodor. Please, don't. I'm not old enough yet."

Afterwards, she lay still on the yellow grass for a long time. Her long, damp hair was fanned out around her head. Two rivulets of hot tears ran down her cheeks from her tightly-shut eyes. Her full, adolescent lips trembled.

"Don't tell anyone, hear?"

"I won't," she whispered, then sniffled and began to sob loudly. "When'll we get married?" she asked through her tears.

"Married? Oh. We will. As soon as you get a little older. But meanwhile, don't tell a soul."

"I won't," she repeated and snuggled up to him as trustfully as a kitten. "You've got to love me now. And I'll love you till I die."

Fyodor hated himself, because he knew for a fact they would never be married.

A short while before that Demian Iniutin had given him forty rubles. Fyodor had downed a bottle of home-brew, feeling like a chip being pulled down into a whirlpool. Now, at last, today, this very minute, had he finally been carried to the brink, tossed into the icy whirlpool and sucked down. What was he to do about Anfisa now? What was he to do about Anna? What was he to do about Iniutin's stupid son, Kirian? Or his own brother Ivan, who kept gazing at Anna like a sick cow, while she kept looking at Fyodor sullenly?

Indeed, he had been carried off and tossed into a whirlpool. Fyodor did not know whether what he had done on that dark, starry night in the steppe had helped him to cast off the first stirrings of love he had felt for Anfisa or, on the contrary, had only fanned the flames. A sudden change seemed to have come over her and she seemed suddenly to have matured. Anfisa had deep rings under her eyes, though her eyes danced with joy. She looked upon the sorry cottages of Mikhailovka with a gentle, thoughtful smile, and this smile, the new, proud carriage of her head, the very way she now walked seemed to proclaim that she

had suddenly discovered something so impossibly wonderful that others would never know her joy. Fyodor understood this feeling of hers. He took the utmost precautions not to be found out and would meet her in secret on Wednesdays, swearing each time that this was the last time, that he would not touch her, and that he would not even meet her the following Wednesday. He was thankful she had not gotten pregnant. However, the moment Anfisa's firm young body pressed against his, the moment he felt the taste of her sweet, hot lips and heard her faint, passionate moaning, he would forget all his promises to himself. The following Wednesday he would find himself unable to resist meeting her again.

He saw Anfisa on Wednesdays and Anna on Thursdays, coming to her completely spent after a night with Anfisa. He was surprised and frightened by this girl who was not even fully grown, for she had turned out to be both passionate and demanding. He would meet Anna in the same bushes behind the village. When the trees shed their leaves and the grass withered, he and Anna would meet in the hayloft near her father's cattle sheds, since it had been an unusually long, mild autumn. Anna would become dizzy from his kisses and would keep asking, over and over,

"Do you love me, Fyodor? Do you really love me?"

"Sure."

"Oh!"

Sometimes he would catch himself thinking that he would jilt her, because she bored him so, and would marry Anfisa. But this would immediately make him frown. He would be annoyed at the very idea of such a thing. Why, babies would roll out of a hot-blooded girl like Anfisa just like peas out of a pot. What would he do with a slew of them? How'd he ever begin to support them? As for Anna, well, he might get used to her in time.

He again recalled her saying that he had only wanted to marry her on account of her father's money.

Fyodor raised his eyes, saw that Kruzhilin had finished speaking and was now seated at the table. The director of the machine and tractor station was speaking. Fyodor

heard the sound of his voice, but had no idea what the man was saying.

Anna had been right. She had guessed his intentions. Perhaps he would have dropped her after all, since she was such a plain-looking girl, and couldn't hold a candle to Anfisa. But some strange transformation seemed to be going on inside of Anna. She suddenly filled out and acquired curves where there had been angles, like a scrawny filly let out to pasture after a long, hungry winter. The tiny knobs of her breasts began to swell rapidly, while her back became straight. Roses bloomed in her cheeks. Her large gray eyes became almond-shaped. There were dancing sparks in them, and they lit up her face as they never had before. Fyodor was surprised to see that she was now every bit as pretty as Anfisa. Her neck, once scrawny, was proudly arched. Her hips, so angular before, had become rounded. One unusually mild and sunny day in November, and probably the last in the year, Fyodor glimpsed Anna from afar and gasped. There, coming slowly down the sunlit street was a tall, rare beauty, carrying her head and heavy, honey-blond braids proudly. It seemed that her braids were hot streams of sunshine pouring down her back.

That had been on a Wednesday. Fyodor then met Anfisa, as always. He went to the rendezvous from force of habit, thinking all the while of the tall beauty, not even of Anna, but of the girl who had come sailing down the village street at noon like a vision. He did not notice the state Anfisa was in. She was upset, worried and did not respond to him as she always had. After a while she began to cry.

"I think I got caught. I've missed my second month. And yesterday I felt like throwing up something awful."

"That's what we get for fooling around," Fyodor said irritably.

"I know," Anfisa swallowed her tears. "I kept wondering what was wrong, and today I asked Ma about it. She looked like she was going to kill me. You should've heard her screaming."

"You mean you told her?"

"No. You said I wasn't to tell a soul. She thinks it's Kirian. What's going to happen now, Fyodor?"

"Let her go in thinking it's him. And don't you let on. Understand? Not a word!"

"Course I won't."

"There." He heaved a sigh of relief. "Don't worry, your ma'll get rid of it for you."

"Why? Maybe...."

"Don't be silly. What do we need a baby for now? Everybody'll make fun of you. Besides, let's...." He was thinking of Anna and had nearly said, "Let's not meet any more or fool around like we've been doing, or you'll get in trouble again." The words were on the tip of his tongue, but he felt it would kill her for sure if he uttered them. There was no telling what she might do: drown herself, or God knows what. Then again, he decided it would be easier to break off after she's gotten rid of it, and so changed his sentence in mid-air to say, "Let's not meet for a while. Till you get rid of it. Anyway, there's no place for us to meet, now. It'll start snowing any day."

Anfisa sat weeping on the ground, hugging her knees and resting her head on them.

"There's no need for that. You tell me about Kirian Iniutin, now."

"What's there to tell? He tags me everywhere. Even if I chase him, he still tags along. I think he's guessed about you and me, even though he's never come right out and said anything."

Fyodor knew she was right, for Kirian scowled at him whenever they met.

Four days later, just before the first snow fell, the following occurred.

Kaftanov showed up at his house unexpectedly on a Monday afternoon after a long absence. Fyodor and Demian Iniutin were sitting under an overhang, drinking tea and watching the peasant men and women filling the cribs with rye. Kaftanov drove up in his wicker carriage with Ivan on the box. He jumped down before the wheels stopped turning, ran around to the lathered horses and hung on the bridles to make them stop. Kaftanov was as

red as a beet and drunk. He marched up to Iniutin and grabbed him by his stringy beard.

"You old dog! " he bellowed and flung him aside. The old man hit the ground. "Get up! " Kaftanov began kicking his manager, who was also the village elder.

"What's the matter, Mikhail Lukich? God have mercy...." Iniutin mumbled as he scrambled up despite his peg leg.

"Who'd you take on as a helper? " Kaftanov roared. "Who'd you give such a sweet, clean job to? Didn't I tell you to leave him rot in the woods for being so contrary? "

When Iniutin had assigned him the job of looking after the women reapers, Fyodor had thought to himself that Kaftanov would be angry when he found out, but he had never dreamed he would fall into such a wild rage.

"Iva-a-an! Gimme the whip! " Kaftanov yelled, turning on his heel.

Ivan did as he was told, looking straight ahead. Before Fyodor realized what was happening, the lash came down across his shoulder, setting it on fire.

"This is for your good work! And for being so stubborn! "

Fyodor thrashed about by the barn wall trying to avoid the thongs, but the lash reached out for him like a snake no matter which way he turned, stinging him every time.

"This is for Anna! You bastard! Who'd you try to lay those filthy paws on? I'll break them like matchsticks! I'll yank your legs out of your body! "

Fyodor stopped trying to duck. He jerked at each lash and thought dully, "So that's it! So Ivan's told him about Anna and me! He even handed him the whip. That son-of-a-bitch! " He swayed and headed towards his brother, holding his hands out before him to get them around Ivan's neck. However, he walked right into Ivan's iron fist, which sent him sprawling. As he lay face-down in the dust, Fyodor felt the salty taste of blood in his mouth.

"Pa-a-aa! " he heard Anna scream as she tumbled down the porch steps and ran towards him. "Don't touch him! You murderers! " She ran up to him, shoved her father and Iniutin out of the way, bent down and tried to

lift him. "Fyodor! My darling! "

Kaftanov turned green. He grabbed her braids and whacked her head against the barn wall. Then he began lashing her, forcing her back into the house. She did not cry out again, but stumbled and fell to her hands and knees at each lash then crawled a few steps, her braids trailing through the dust, rose and fell again. An inferno was roaring inside Fyodor's head. He wanted to jump up and rush to her aid, but he had not the strength to rise.

Then he saw Kaftanov turn away from the porch. He wiped his sweaty brow on his sleeve and said, panting as he spoke,

"I want Ivan here to be your helper. For good. Teach him the ropes. He's been a groom long enough. And throw that rat out."

Fyodor lost consciousness. He came to feeling that someone was shaking him and opened his eyes with difficulty to see Polikarp Kruzhilin crouching beside him.

"Get paid in full for working for Kaftanov? Or does he still owe you some? " Polikarp inquired, smiling down at him. "Come on, I'll take you home."

"You were sorry for my father when Ivan shot him."

No, you're wrong there, Anna! Fyodor was never one bit sorry for Kaftanov, Fyodor was thinking, referring to himself in the third person as he now stared at Polikarp Kruzhilin, the District Committee Secretary, who was sitting at the end of the long table. No, it wasn't that at all. It was something else altogether. He was terribly sorry about something else then. Something else had tormented him all his waking hours. How had things taken such a turn? How had all his vague plans and hopes suddenly come crashing down around him that summer he had worked as Kaftanov's manager at the forest retreat, when the place he had marked out at Kaftanov's side for himself had gone to Ivan?

The meeting was still in progress, although Fyodor did not really know whether it had just begun or had been dragging on for hours. Some time had passed, apparently, for the blue shadows on the snow cast by the shops on the

machine and tractor station were gone, as were the buildings, which had been swallowed up by the cold blackness, all save a single window that appeared as a fizzy yellow spot. The chairman talked on and on.

Fyodor's mind returned to the past. Yes, that was how things had turned out. But how had he come to join the partisans?

It was impossible to recall all that had happened during that scorching summer of 1916, the surprisingly mild winter of '17 and the confusion of '18 and '19. There had been a revolution in the country, but it had not reached Mikhailovka Village where for quite some time after things remained as they had always been, with Kaftanov lord and master of all. After a while he stopped bullying the villagers and began hastily winding up his affairs. Soviet power came to Mikhailovka on the day Kruzhilin and Aleinikov arrived from Shantara, called a meeting of the villagers and resolved to form a Village Soviet. Pankrat Nazarov was elected its chairman. Kaftanov moved to his forest retreat where he remained in a state of perpetual drunkenness.

So much had been forgotten in the intervening years, so much had faded from his memory like the colors of summer towards the end of September. However, the main events were not forgotten, especially since there were not too many of them to begin with.

As far as he was concerned, everything had begun on a summer evening in 1918.

A storm had been gathering. Towards evening the sky was rent by constant bolts of lightening. The bright flashes had streamed down the crags of Zvenigora, as the taiga echoed the gusts of wind forebodingly.

Fyodor and Anfisa's regular meeting place was located in a shallow ravine in the forest near the village. He had put up a tent of boughs there, with pieces of felt padding for a floor.

Anfisa was away that day. She had left the village the previous night to accompany her mother to the neighboring hamlet of Kazanikha. Her mother was a midwife and

was teaching Anfisa her trade. However, Fyodor had taken his canvas raincoat and set out stubbornly for the tent. It was a Wednesday, and he was daring Anfisa not to show up at the usual time, though actually he was positive she would come running, no matter what. Approaching the tent, he was stunned to find Kirian Iniutin there, hard at work destroying his love-nest: yanking the tent poles out of the ground with a vengeance and tossing the pine boughs out of the ravine.

"You son-of-a-bitch! " Fyodor shouted and leaped at him, grabbing Kirian's lapels with one hand and crashing his fist into his chin. Kirian slumped to the ground.

"When'd you come spying on us? "

"Leave her be, Fyodor! Leave her alone! " Kirian squealed like a puppy as he cringed by Fyodor's legs.

Fyodor kicked him in a rage and would have kicked him again if Anfisa had not come crashing through the bushes just then. She was dishevelled, hot and dirty, and looked as if she had come straight out of the bath house to roll in the dust.

"Fyodor! " she cried and fell to the ground in exhaustion. "Kaftanov's there. In Kazanikha. And Zinovy, too! And Kruzhilin and that man Aleinikov are in Mikhailovka with Pankrat Nazarov. Imagine! Pankrat Nazarov! " She was gasping for air. Neither Fyodor nor Kirian could understand what she was talking about. They stood there looking at her anxiously.

"What about Kazanikha? Talk so's I can understand you! " Fyodor shouted.

"Kaftanov's there. And a cavalry unit. About fifty men, or maybe even more. They came galloping into Kazanikha and pulled the Village Soviet man out of the house, and right there by the porch.... Lord! Right by the porch steps, they slashed him to pieces! And his wife, who's in labor. She was in labor, but they pulled her out of the house by the braids, and my ma, too. And Kaftanov screamed, 'So you're bringing a new Red bastard into the world to suck our blood?' I was heating water in the kitchen and jumped out of the window." She hugged the ground and began weeping hysterically. Fyodor and Kirian were dazed by what she had said. Neither could as yet

comprehend what they were to do. Thunder crashed over them, ever louder, and lightning cracked, but the wind seemed to have died down, and there was no rain.

Kaftanov had vanished from the retreat at the Ognev Springs about half a year before, and had taken Fyodor's brother Ivan along. There had been no word of either of them since then. Now they had finally surfaced.

"Don't cry, Anfisa," Kirian said, bending over her and stroking her shoulder.

"Come on, tell us what happened to your mother," Fyodor said, crouching down on the other side.

"Mamma! Ma-aa-maa!" she wailed, rolling her head back and forth, hitting her forehead against the ground, making her braids fly. She suddenly got to her knees. Her eyes, which were quite wild from all she had been through, seemed animal-like when they were lit up by flashes of lightning. "What're you waiting for? Kaftanov and Zinovy, and the soldiers are coming to Mikhailovka! They're probably on their way now! They said they were going to slit Nazarov's stomach! And Kruzhilin's and his friend's. Somebody had told them they were in Mikhailovka."

Kruzhilin and Yakov Aleinikov had come to the village the previous day to see about grain or something, and had argued heatedly with Pankrat Nazarov. They had called a general meeting for that evening, but it had been postponed for the following day on account of the gathering storm.

"What if ... they're already there?" Kirian breathed.

"Is Ivan with them? Did you see him?"

"If you don't run to warn them they'll be killed! Like my ma was. Like ... I'll hate you both till I die if you don't!" She rose and stumbled off towards the village. Kirian and Fyodor followed. Anfisa broke into a run, forcing them to run as well.

That stormy evening neither Anfisa nor the boys understood what was happening or why Kaftanov, who had been in hiding for so long, had suddenly turned up with a gang of cutthroats. When Fyodor came to his senses in the Shantara hospital several weeks later he finally learned that there had been a Whiteguard Czech uprising in

Siberia in the end of May which had had abolished Soviet power in all the large towns and cities along the railroad line.

That evening of the storm they had been able to warn Kruzhilin, Aleinikov and Nazarov and his family. However, they had come running into the village when it was too late for the men to escape, for Kaftanov's bandits were riding in from both ends of Mikhailovka, shooting, shouting and whistling. Kruzhilin, Aleinikov, Nazarov, his wife and seven-year-old son Maxim, Fyodor, Anfisa, Kirian and Anna, who had appeared as from nowhere, were racing along the narrow lanes. Nazarov's wife kept crossing herself. Maxim was bawling. Nazarov had him under his arm like a sack of flour. At times the shooting and thundering hooves would sound in the next lane and then they would fall to the ground and press close to the wattle fences. They all knew that only a miracle could save them from certain doom. Kaftanov had the smell of blood in his nostrils and would spare no one, not even his own daughter if he caught her with them.

"How'd you get here?" Fyodor shouted. "Run! You'll get yourself killed for nothing! "

"You run! Uncle Pankrat! You and your wife and boy.... Let's try to make it to our house by the back gardens. I'll lock you in my closet. Maybe they won't think to look there. There's room for the three of you inside."

"Go on, Pankrat! " Kruzhilin shouted, put his hands on Anna's shoulders, turned her to face him for a second and said, "Thanks, girl. I didn't know you had it in you. If we survive we'll thank you later. Go on down this lane. You just might make it."

The little group broke away and ran off. That was when Anfisa shouted,

"Kirian! There's your house! We can try the cellar. Or the loft. Nobody'll ever look there! "

"I dunno. Pa's home. He's been sick a lot after Ma died."

"Sweetie! " Anfisa pressed her face against his chest. "You're good. Be better than you've ever been. I swear to God I'll marry you! "

"But what about Pa? You know what he's like."

"They'll kill me if they catch me! Kaftanov spotted me climbing out the window in Kazanikha. You know what he yelled? 'Catch the midwife's brat! Chop off her hands! She was going to deliver the Red bastard, too!'" Then, seeing that Kirian still hesitated, she wailed, "Kiri-aan! "

"All right. But you'll have to take my Pa down into the cellar, with you. Or else he'll tell them."

They all ran along the back gardens, all except Fyodor. He felt relieved now and sat by the fence, staring at Nazarov's house going up in flames, thinking that the Iniutin house was right around the corner and they'd make it. But what about Anna and the others? It was quite a way to her house.

The following morning he learned that she had managed to get them there in time. They had certainly been saved by the descending darkness and the storm that finally had broken. Fyodor learned all this from Ivan who dropped by the house for a moment. He had no sword, but carried a riding crop.

"I can see you're a regular hero. You've even got a crop. A mighty fine suitor, seems to me," Fyodor had said. Ivan had merely tossed his head. There was a light fuzz on his face now, Fyodor noted.

Half an hour later the door flew open and Kaftanov burst into the house, shoving aside old Silanty who had gotten to his feet to greet him. Kaftanov grabbed Fyodor by his shirt and shook him.

"Where are they? You'd better tell me if you want to live! They're someplace around here! You were seen with them last night."

"I don't know where they are. Who says he saw me? "

"We'll soon find out if you're lying or not." Kaftanov cast him at the feet of a group of bearded men who crowded in the doorway. They got hold of his arms and legs and carried him out, pulled off his jacket, shirt and trousers and tied him face-down to a plank, which they then dropped to the ground.

"This is it. They'll shoot me. They'll shoot me," Fyodor kept saying to himself as he was being dragged out

and stripped. He had not even the time to wonder whether he was scared or not, because everything was happening so quickly. The last thing he would have guessed was that he was simply going to be horsewhipped. When the lash finally came down upon his back, raising a welt, he finally understood what was up and yelled, "What're you doing, you bastards! " However, he had not shouted from pain, but from rage and indignation.

This rage helped him to survive. That and the fact that Ivan was standing off to a side, stroking his horse's muzzle and staring sullenly at his brother. Once again Fyodor's will-power triumphed in time of bitter trial.

He was whipped soundly, turning his back, buttocks and legs down to his soles to a bloody pulp. He only felt the pain in the beginning. Then it was as if rockets were bursting inside of his head every time the lash came down. He kept blacking out, and each time he was revived it was to hear Kaftanov saying, "Are you going to tell me where they are? This is the last time I'm asking! "

Fyodor's eyelids were swollen, either because the lash had nicked them or simply from the torture he was enduring, so that he could barely see. But he did see Ivan standing there with his arms around the horse's head, and a crowd of men, women and children pressing against the outside of the fence. He could hear the women and children wailing and the men shouting. "I've got to keep my tongue now. I'll never live it down if I don't. They'll say I couldn't take it like a man. I'll never live the shame of it down. But if I live through this, I'll get even with Ivan. That's for sure. Where's Anna? Can she see me? " Such were his thoughts.

Consciousness returned. He was in a white void, still lying on his stomach. His back was aflame. He found himself staring at a row of iron rods. It took a few moments for him to realize he was in a bed. When he turned his head slightly Anna came into his line of vision. She was sitting stiffly on a stool and looked sick. She seemed like a stranger.

"Where am I? "

"In the hospital. In Shantara. You've been here three days."

"Oh. How'd I get here? "

"Kruzhilin and Aleinikov brought you."

"Um. Meaning they've escaped."

"Yes. They hid out in Iniutin's cellar. They had Demian down there with them. Kirian was the only one in the house. He said he was scared to death, because my Pa kept coming by to ask him where his pa was."

"What about Nazarov? "

"They're all right. No one ever came near my closet. They never dreamed I'd hidden anybody there. Nazarov and his family are here in Shantara now, too."

"How come? "

"You can't imagine what's been happening! There's no more Soviets in the villages around here. They're just holding out in Shantara. Pa and his men are riding through the villages, and Kruzhilin and Aleinikov got a detachment together here. They've got sentries posted on all the roads out of town to make sure Pa and his men don't catch them napping. And Kirian's disappeared."

"What? "

"Yes. Pa and his men rode out of Mikhailovka that night. Then, as soon as Demian was let out of the cellar, he saddled his horse and tore off after them. Then the next morning they all came riding back. Demian turned his own house upside-down. He was looking for Kirian, and he had his gun out. And he was looking for Anfisa. But they both went off into the forest that night. They wanted me to go along with them."

"What? Why didn't you? "

"I had to come here," Anna murmured. She raised her handkerchief to her eyes slowly and sobbed. "Oh, Fyodor! What've they done to you? "

What else did Fyodor recall of those turbulent years? His and Anna's partisan wedding? Perhaps. Everything else was a confusion of days and nights, smoke, fire, shooting and blood.

The partisan movement in Shantara Volost and the outlying regions had begun long before Kolchak had formed his Whiteguard army. The ranks of Kaftanov's gang swelled greatly in a short period of time. While Fyodor was in the hospital the gang raided Shantara twice, nearly

capturing the town. Kruzhilin knew that his men would not hold out against a third attack and so led his poorly-armed detachment first into the gorges of Zvenigora and then, after a pitched battle, on beyond Mikhailovka into the wilderness of the upper reaches of the Gromotukha. Fyodor was still sick and weak, his lesions were only just beginning to heal, but he left together with Kruzhilin's detachment. Anna accompanied him, having flatly refused to leave him.

In time Fyodor's strength returned. At first, Kruzhilin placed him at the head of a group of five riders, then ten and, finally, of a squadron. Anna was always there to wash and mend his clothes and look after him. He had tried to take her several times, but that stubborn, strong-headed girl would always reply,

"No. You'll have to kill me first. But if you want to, we can get married."

For some reason or other Fyodor did not want to get married. Besides, this was no time for weddings. All that autumn of 1918 Kruzhilin's detachment was either hot in pursuit of Kaftanov's gang or else escaping from it through the dense forests. The advent of winter brought a respite. Kaftanov's cutthroats quietened down some and then disappeared altogether, while many of the partisans dispersed to their homes. However, they were soon drifting back into the taiga, since Kolchak's punitive detachments were razing the villages.

In time Fyodor understood why he had hesitated to marry Anna. Kirian Iniutin had shown up in the partisan detachment that fall. He seemed still more stooped-shouldered than ever, and somehow actually bent.

"So! You survived after all! " Fyodor could not hide his surprise.

"Yes. Anfisa managed to hide us away."

"Where? "

"Over there. A lot of places. She told me to come here and join the partisans. Kruzhilin's taken me on. He didn't say a word."

"What about her? Where is she? Why didn't she come along? "

"She couldn't. She's not up to it now."

"Now? What's she, pregnant or something? You mean, skinny one, you did it?"

"Nobody knows whether it's going to be mine or yours. That's what's the trouble."

It was this uncertainty that had kept Fyodor from marrying Anna.

The following spring they had word that Anfisa had given birth to a still-born child in a distant village the previous winter and had nearly died. Kirian cheered up visibly at the news that she was alive, and Fyodor decided to marry Anna. However, the events that followed swept aside all thoughts of a wedding. A Whiteguard regiment under Colonel Zubov had been sent down from the city of Novonikolayevsk on a special assignment. The assignment was to wipe out Kruzhilin's detachment.

They finally had the wedding in November 1919, after the first snow had fallen. It was held in the large forest settlement of Maksutovo, and although it was not a very grand wedding, it was a noisy one lasting all day and into the night. Kaftanov's gang had been demolished, but Kolchak's army still held Shantara. Ragged groups of Whiteguard bandits were massing there. According to information gleaned by the ubiquitous Yakov Aleinikov, a new punitive unit was being hastily formed. It might start out at any moment.

It was a merry wedding, with troikas, accordions, singing and dancing. Even Kruzhilin, remembering his youth, as he said, gave a fiery rendition of what he called a Russian-Gypsy dance. Still and all, Fyodor had a funny feeling that there was something missing: either merriment, or else there was too much of it; it had been held too early or, on the contrary, too late. There was something about his and Anna's wedding that was make-believe, as if the soul had been extracted from the merriment, leaving only sounds, as if the joy had been extracted from the wine and homebrew, leaving only the intoxicating fumes. Would everything have been all right if Anfisa had sat by his side instead of Anna? No, that was not it. He had not seen Anfisa for a long time and was not at all upset by the knowledge that she had slept with Kirian, or that whenever the occasion presented itself, Kirian would send her his

regards and receive hers.

Fyodor started and then felt as if he had been scalded when he overheard two old women talking in undertones,

"Lord Almighty! The things they do now! Her father's been murdered, and now she's marrying the murderer's brother! "

"It's more than one can understand! "

"No wonder she's keeping out of sight. The slut has some shame left."

"That's the God-honest truth."

Their whispering sent the blood rushing to his head. He knew that everything would have been right if Kaftanov had given his daughter to him in marriage as he once dreamed he would. There would have been joy in the drinking and more spirit in the music if her father had now sat at the table with them, in drunken high spirits. But Mikhail Lukich was no more and would never be. His riches, too, were gone. What had Fyodor gained? What was the use of this wedding and merry-making? He had sat up at their talk because he had become frightened by his own thoughts. "What am I thinking about after everything that's happened and that's still happening in the world! " He downed two full water glasses of the strongest home-brew in quick succession to banish these thoughts forever and dull his senses.

This he did. However, he was brought up with a start when he realized that Anna, who had eluded him for so many years, was not a virgin.

He recalled that night when he had accused Ivan of being her lover and she had sworn that he was not, saying that she could never tell him who had ravished her, but that she was pure at heart and would forever be his slave.

"Fyodor Savelyev! " Someone was calling his name. "What's the matter? Are you sleeping? "

It was Golovanov, an official of the machine and tractor station. He was a pleasant, gregarious man, although there was something about him that reminded one of Aleinikov. He was a disabled veteran and still used a crutch. It was now resting against the side of the rostrum.

"No, I'm not sleeping. I'm just very tired."

"Nobody believes you can harvest two-and-a-half thousand hectares."

"That's their business. I will if you give me a combine with three trailers. I read about a fellow in the papers who harvested two thousand that way last season, and I'll harvest two-and-a-half if the machinery's good and not like the junk I had to work with this year." As Fyodor spoke he could still hear Anna saying that the fact that there was no wealth left by the time he married her was what had been gnawing at him all his life.

Had it really? No, you're wrong there, Anna! You're a smart woman, and maybe a lot of what you said was right, but you're wrong this time. I did want to marry you for your pa's money in the beginning, and that's a fact. For a moment there at the wedding I was sorry things hadn't turned out the way I hoped they would. But what was the use of crying over spilled milk? Feeling sorry wouldn't bring any of it back. So you're way off the track here.

He suddenly thought he had spoken the last of this aloud and jumped up anxiously.

"What's the matter? You're not sick, are you?" Golo-vanov asked.

Fyodor saw the anxiety in both his and Kruzhilin's eyes.

"No. I'm all right. I just feel queasy. I'd rather leave now, if that's all right with you." He turned towards the door before either of them could reply.

Once out on the porch, Fyodor saw that some of the people had followed him out. Kruzhilin said he should take his horse and carriage home, and someone else said they'd drive him, but Fyodor refused, saying he'd make it himself.

* * *

Fyodor was walking slowly down the dark, deserted streets, mopping his damp brow from time to time and thinking unhappily that that devil of a woman, Anna, was

right again. Yes, he was sorry. He was! He was sorry Kaftanov had been killed when there was nothing of his wealth for him to inherit. Yes, it had gnawed at him all his life like a worm eating through wood or like dripping water washing away a stone. It had gnawed away at his heart, leaving a running sore there.

During the first years of his married life Fyodor would not admit this to himself. He told himself that things could not have turned out differently, because the whole world was in turmoil.

After the Civil War ended he had tilled the soil for about a year in Mikhailovka. He had sown a bit of rye in '21 and in the summer he would often come to his tiny plot, sit down on a birch post and gaze at the blossoming rye. Lost in thought, he would feel a dull ache in his heart, as if someone were squeezing it. Fyodor would recall Kaftanov's vast fields, his barns and the forest retreat at the Ognev Springs. The spot was now marked by a pile of charred brands at the lakeside.

Everything had gone up in smoke: the barns, the retreat and Kaftanov himself. Since everything had turned to ashes, what was there to regret? Besides, he might have perished in the bloody holocaust as well and was lucky he didn't.

One day, as he was sitting by his field, Anfisa came up to him. She had married Kirian six months after Fyodor had married Anna and was living with her husband in Demian Iniutin's house. They had sown a bit of rye next to Fyodor's strip, plowing and sowing at the same time, within sight of each other, yet acting like strangers, and merely greeting each other coldly.

Anfisa came up and stood beside him.

"What do you want?" Fyodor demanded crossly.

"Nothing. I just wanted to have a look at you close-up."

"Got tired of looking at your husband?"

"He's not a hare, he won't run off to the woods."

Fyodor rose. Anfisa was standing as before, a firm and well-rounded young woman, her full arms crossed under

her breasts. There was pity in her dark eyes, as if she knew what he was thinking of. Her expression angered him.

"I said what do you want? "

"Just came to have a look and see whether you're happy. And whether you love her. I mean Anna."

"I wouldn't have married her if I didn't."

"No." She shook her head. "No." She stood there, wringing her hands, as if she would pull off her fingers. Then she swayed against him, whispering through her tears, "What've we done? Oh, what've we done? "

Her tear-filled eyes, her whisper and her trembling body aroused him. He stroked her back and murmured hoarsely,

"It's all right. It's all right."

They said not a word as they went into the birch copse, leaving it late that evening when the invisible sun had painted the bullowing clouds at the edge of the sky blood-red.

"It's just my fate," Anfisa was saying sadly. "I'll just go on loving you all my life. And you'll be mine, even though it won't be very often. But ... but I'll bear Kirian his own children. I don't want to cheat him in that. I can't. And there's no need to."

As this came back to him, Fyodor walked on down the cold, dark streets of Shantara, wincing at the sound of the snow crunching underfoot. It was getting colder, and the snow crunched ever louder.

He stopped, because he now felt really nauseous. He held on to a lamppost for support. The crunching sound stopped instantly, yet Fyodor felt it was not the snow after all, but his wife Anna, speaking to him in a grating voice, asking him something, demanding a reply to something or other. He shoved off from the post and continued on his way. The voice was speaking now in rhythm to his steps: "What are you li-ving for? What are you li-ving for? "

Fyodor was suddenly aghast at the thought that this sound and this voice would never leave him. Until now he had been indifferent to everything, he had lived in a void,

in a strange half-sleep. But he had awakened now. He had been awakened by Anna's question. At first, it had seemed stupid to him, but now it gave him no peace. He was even imagining it in the crunching sound of the snow.

He shut his eyes and hurried on towards home. However, after having taken a few steps he opened his eyes again, for he was afraid he'd bump into something. Still, he saw nothing, for there was nothing but blackness all around.

* * *

The June sun beat down mercilessly. White fuzz from the flowering poplars drifted through the dry, stifling air, rolling down the road to the railroad in shaggy white balls, piling up in the ditches and around the dusty burdocks along the way.

Natasha was oblivious to the heat, and the snowstorm of poplar fuzz. She walked on along the sticky asphalt, staring at the road dully. Anna walked beside her, wiping her eyes with the corner of her kerchief.

"Don't, Mamma," Natasha would say and choke down a sob. She kept hearing a snatch of a song she had heard at the community center some days ago:

*An enemy that has dared to attack us
Will see Russia's winds bode it ill.
What was a young wife
To say in parting,
As a boy of twenty
Went off to war?
She said:
I shall wait for you, love.*

Natasha was well aware that Semyon would be called up that spring or summer, but it seemed so far removed as to be impossible. Perhaps this was because the night she had become a woman and Semyon's wife her understanding of the world and of all that was happening was once again turned topsy-turvy. All she remembered of that night were a few bits of conversation and a few moments.

Granny Akulina had asked them whether she should make up one bed or two and Semyon had replied: "One." And then the old woman had said, "God bless you." Then Semyon had walked up and down when she was under the covers, pulling them up over her head to hide her shame as an impatient, sweet and terrible longing gripped her. And, finally, his hands, knees and body, so hot and strong and strange, a body of which she had first been frightened and to which she had then pressed close, so happy and so spent.

The same feeling of exhaustion, shame and confusion held her in its sway for several days after. She remembered faces: Granny Akulina, Manya Ogorodnikova, and then Semyon's mother. They had all spoken to her, but she had not understood a word of what was being said.

"That's not how I wanted Semyon to get married. You should have some kind of a wedding. At least a very small one," she finally discerned Anna saying.

She had cried out in fright, "Oh, no! "

"There won't be any. This is no time for weddings. Not after Fyodor's brother just died and when Makar's to go on trial any day now. Everything seems to be snowballing."

This made Natasha feel still more distracted and guilty for having known that night, for a happiness which only then seemed to have suddenly become obvious to her, as if a secret door had been opened in her heart, releasing a heady, unknown substance that had engulfed her, dimming her senses.

"I understand," she had murmured and then continued in jumbled phrases, "I told you I loved him. Let it snowball. And Makar's going on trial. And Anton Silantievich died. But I can't help myself! So you can think whatever you want to about me."

"You misunderstood me, Natasha," Anna drew the girl's head to her warm bosom. "I'm not blaming you. I'm happy you two are.... All I said was that this is no time for weddings."

"But what difference does it make? "

Everything in the world had become topsy-turvy again, so that a wedding, a man named Makar, the fire at the

plant and the director's death, which seemed now to have taken place ages ago, were of no importance, nor was the war which was being waged somewhere far away, nor was the fact that Semyon was to be called up for active service and would go away. He was supposed to, but would not leave her, because here he was, here were his hands and his body.

"Oh, Semyon!" she would whisper in the night as she embraced him.

"What?"

"I'm yours! Do you feel I'm yours?"

"Silly. Sure, I do."

There was Semyon, the dazzling snow and the bright sun. Then there were the springwaters and puddles in which the sun floated, the damp, pungent earth and the first grass. And, finally, the glittering water of the Gromotukha which burned their bodies when they first went swimming that summer.

Towards the end of May the water became warm in the river. On June 1st, a Sunday, they went beyond the village and swam out to the island. As they lay on the hot sand Natasha felt slightly nauseous.

For several days she had felt some strange, inner change taking place in her. It surprised her and made her keenly attuned to her own body. Granny Akulina was the first to notice. She came right out with her questions and then smiled broadly.

"That's wonderful. And I'll be your nanny. What a joy for me before I end my days."

"Oh, no! Maybe I'm mistaken. Anyway, please don't say a word to Semyon about it."

"Maybe you are. It's happened before. But if you start feeling sick to your stomach you can be sure you're expecting."

Natasha had been waiting, and now it had happened. She caught her breath and turned deathly pale, because at that very moment it suddenly dawned on her that Semyon would be leaving for the war soon. He would be leaving her!

The day before he had visited his draft board and had returned looking grave to say that he would be leaving in

two weeks' time. Still, it seemed unreal, something that was to happen in some far distant future. At the very moment she first felt queasy a veil seemed to have dropped from her eyes, her mind cleared and she was struck full-force by the realization that in but a few days he would be gone, that some unponderable force would snatch him from her.

"No! " she cried and embraced him. Her voice carried across the island.

"What's the matter? " he sat up.

"I don't want you to go! I won't let you! Don't." Her hands trembled, her body shook. Grains of sand fell from her chest, stomach and firm, slightly tanned legs. "Yura isn't going."

He looked at her gently, as he always did, but his river-blue eyes looked surprised or astonished for an instant, as if he had noticed something about her that he had never noticed before. She instinctively understood the meaning of his glance and pushed him away.

"You think I'm stupid, don't you? Well, I don't care! I just don't want you to go! "

"Don't talk like that."

"But I love you. And I'm scared."

"I'm scared, too," he murmured, confessing something he would never have otherwise. "And you're right, Yura isn't going. I don't think he ever will. But I have to."

What he had said and the way he had said it struck her as being very significant, though she could not as yet understand wherein the significance of his remark lay.

"Why? Why do you? Tell me."

"What are you talking about? All right. I want to get at the nazis myself. I want to help chase them out of our country. Isn't that clear? "

"Yes. But it's such a simple way to explain things. There must be something else. Something that's the most important reason."

He was silent for a few moments, frowned and looked annoyed. "There probably is. But it's not for me to say. I don't know the answer."

That was what he had said when she had questioned him about his dashing to the transformer pillar. He could

never explain. Suddenly, and this was as sudden as a bright beam of light cutting through her mind and lighting up something there, she finally found the answer to what the real sources of life were that were to be found within a person, something Subbotin had spoken of at the director's funeral. She now knew the answer to a question that had been bothering her for so long. It was the same force that had sent Semyon and the director dashing into the flames to rescue Nechayev and then to the transformer pillar. It was what was now calling Semyon to active service. Yes, this was the great and mysterious force which lived on in a human being and which, in the most difficult and critical moments, caused him to present the strongest, most just and noble side of his nature to life.

All this flashed through her mind. Speaking softly and with conviction she said, "You do know."

He laughed, pushed her back onto the sand and they rolled into the water. Then they sunbathed. Semyon gazed out at the middle of the river where the current coursed over a shoal, shimmering and sparkling in the sun, blinding him as it rushed on. By the bank the water was calm. Its clear blue waves lapped at the wet sand softly.

"What do I know? I don't know anything," he mused. "All I do know is that I've got to be there." His eyes glittered, as if he could see something that frightened him, yet aroused his curiosity.

A snipe alighted on the hard wet strip of sand by the water's edge and began walking up and down on its spindly legs. Small tufts of cloud hung suspended in the sky, while their shadows slipped along the ground. When the edge of a shadow neared the snipe it skittered off, but the shadow caught up with it. Then, as if unwilling to be caught under it, the bird hopped into the air and flew off to a bright sunny spot. A smile touched Semyon's lips.

"Here's something for you to think about," he said in a low voice. "You know what sort of a man my grandfather Kaftanov was. Nobody here has forgotten that, either. Many of them might have if his son Makar wasn't still alive. And you know what my own father's like. When you've thought about it you'll understand why I've got to go. Ma understood me. She cried when she found out, but

she said, 'I know you've got to go, son.' "

"That's not why," Natasha shook her damp head. "I mean, that's not the only reason."

Semyon was gazing off at the steep green slopes of Zvenigora, at the glittering granite crags spotted by the mottled shadows of clouds which seemed to crash into them, bounce back and slip down as crumpled shreds.

"It's not the only reason," he repeated absently, sifting sand from one hand to another. Then he stretched out on his back. The sun, hidden behind a flimsy white cloud, shone through it. The middle of the cloud was thus bluish-pink, the edges were drenched with molten saffron fire, and streaks of liquid amber streamed out from behind. "Because of that cloud up there? And because Uncle Anton died in the fire? And because I met you and fell in love with you? Is that why? It's a nice way to explain it." His voice was becoming harsher. He raised himself up on his elbow and frowned at her.

"You sound funny," she said, trying to understand him. "Why are you angry? "

"I'm sorry. I just don't want you to ask me about things I can't explain. Things that are clear enough anyway."

"I won't. Not any more." She was thinking about something else as she spoke.

Natasha did not tell him then of the new life that was stirring within her, nor did she tell him on the following days, afraid lest she cause him undue anxiety or concern, since he was tense as he awaited the 14th of June, the day of his departure.

Although Semyon had given up his job he kept rushing around: to the plant, to his old home to see his mother, to the draft board, and tried to spend most of his time with Natasha, gazing at her now fondly, now thoughtfully, now sadly. They spent the summer nights wandering on the hills, in the Gromotushka Bushes and along the moonlit river.

"See how everything's turned out? I knew it would all happen soon, and I didn't want.... I wanted you to be free. Anything might happen to me there. But I love you," he said to her on one of their last, fleeting nights together.

"You didn't want to. But who'd have given me all this then? Everything we've known together? And nothing's going to happen. It can't," her dry, kiss-swollen lips whispered. Her body ached from his embraces, but she wanted him to hold her more tightly still.

"You'll be all alone now," he said and seemed to be waiting. "No, there are two of us!" she wanted to cry out, but did not. She would not tell him until the very last moment, so that this would be the thought he would carry off in his heart.

On the night of June 13th the volunteers were summoned to the army post, lined up in the yard and then marched off. Natasha and Anna spent the night outside the enclosure and finally went home at dawn. Natasha lay down in the bed she had once shared with Ganka. At sunup Andrei burst into the room to shout,

"They're marching towards the station! And there's a major at the head of the column! Semyon said we're all to go to the station. And he said to hurry."

She was on the way now, staring at the road under her feet dazedly as the song about Russia's winds droned in her head and Semyon's mother sobbed at her side. A few steps behind them were Mariya Firsovna, Dima, Andrei, Ganka and Semyon's father. Natasha had thought Fyodor would not go to see his son off, because when Andrei had told them to hurry, he had shushed him up. Yet, he had come along. Fyodor was hunched over. He scraped his feet on the ground and also kept his eyes on the road.

The ragged gray cloud over the station was either a raincloud or smoke from the locomotive. The closer they came the more crowded the road became. Something resembling a country bazaar took up all the space around the station. There were bright kerchiefs and blouses, white shirts and faded jackets everywhere. A loud, incomprehensible hum rose above the crowd that milled along the length of the train that was made up of packed freight cars. After a while they discerned the voices, the sounds of women weeping, laughter and the wild strains of an accordion.

"Hurry! We'll be late!" Natasha shouted. She was about to dash towards the train when Anna suddenly

stopped and gasped.

"Never mind. I'll be all right," Anna said and walked on, more quickly now.

At a distance of about a hundred meters from the platform the road turned off to the left, towards the warehouses and the settlement. Yelizarov was standing at the curve. He was in uniform and was directing traffic, although there was no need to. "Go on! Keep to the right! Can't you see where the train is?"

"We're going to the shop," someone said.

"It's closed today. It's all sold out."

The accordion shrilled close by. A drunken voice bellowed, shouting above the sound of the music,

When my mother saw me off...

Natasha saw three young volunteers. One was playing the accordion, the other two had haversacks clung over their shoulders.

"There's the militia!" one of them shouted drunkenly and rushed to embrace Yelizarov. "Goodbye, old man!"

"Venka's going off to war, understand?" the second boy said, tugging at Yelizarov's sleeve.

The third kept on bawling the song, straining the ballows to the utmost,

If we'd all be fools like you....

"Move on! Get going!" Yelizarov shouted, pulling free of them. His cap fell off. "You looking for trouble? Is that it?"

"What's the matter?" one of the boys challenged. "You just go on and tell everybody Venka's volunteered!"

"All right, I will," Yelizarov muttered. He was red in the face and sweating. He bent down for his cap and dusted it off. "Go on. They're loading up!"

The accordion-player cut the song short and shouted to his companions, "Be quiet!" Then he stalked up to Yelizarov and said, "In case you're interested, they load cattle. We're people. We board a train. Understand? Idiot!" At which he pulled Yelizarov's cap down over his eyes.

"Hooligans! Yelizarov never forgets! Remember that, if you ever come back!"

The boy paid no attention. He headed towards the troop train.

"I'd like to see us ever win a war with fools like you for soldiers! " Yelizarov shouted after him.

"You're right, Anikei," someone said. It was a scrawny old man with spindly arms and legs and a long, sun-bronzed neck. "As I recall, they couldn't settle the White-guard Czechs' or Kolchak army's hash, either, twenty years ago."

"Ah! Pankrat Grigoryevich! Come to see someone off, or just having a look? "

"And we're still living under their yoke," Nazarov continued.

"He-he. You're a great joker, aren't you? "

"Who's joking? The soldiers then weren't any better'n these. In fact, they were even worse. And that's why they let the revolution slip through their fingers."

"You really think I'm a fool, don't you? " Yelizarov said to Nazarov's retreating back. Then, spotting Natasha, he glanced around anxiously and moved aside to let her pass. She heard him saying,

"Ah, Fyodor! Hello there. Seeing your son and brother off together, are you? That's war for you."

"Which brother? " Fyodor found himself replying, but his voice was lost in the sudden wail and shout that went up and rolled along the platform from one end of the train to the other.

"They're leaving! " the thought scalded Natasha. She broke into a run, making her way through the crowd, pulling Anna along after her.

"It's the locomotive. It's only the locomotive, Natasha! " Andrei shouted. "They just hitched it on."

Indeed, the train was still standing there. A solid wall of people stood by each gaping double car door that resembled a deep, bottomless pit. Natasha was afraid she would not find Semyon in the confusion and not say good-bye to him. There was so much she had to tell him.

"Where is he? Where is he? " she shouted, clutching Anna's hand.

"There, over there in the last car! Semyon and Uncle Ivan," Dima said, appearing from the crowd.

Natasha glimpsed Ivan Savelyev first. He was standing by one of the black holes of a door embracing a short, thin

woman. Pankrat Nazarov stood beside him. Then she saw Semyon. He held his hands out to them. A moment later both Natasha and his mother were embracing him and weeping.

"Come on, now. Don't," he murmured, his arms around them both.

"Oh, my darling!" Anna wailed, her voice rising higher and higher.

"I'll be waiting for you, love. I'll be waiting for you," Natasha kept repeating, oblivious to the fact that she was repeating a line from the song.

Fyodor came up and stood a few steps away. His large arms hung limply at his sides. Semyon held the two women off a bit and turned to face him.

"I didn't think you'd come."

"I know. That's why I didn't want to."

"Why did you then? I wouldn't have minded."

"I don't know. Maybe I was envious."

"What?"

The people around them could hear what they were saying and it sounded as strange to them as it did to Natasha.

Ivan held Agata off and came closer. "Wait a minute." He looked straight at his brother. "Envious of what? That you haven't been called up?"

"No," Fyodor smiled as if he had swallowed a large rock. "I could've volunteered if I'd wanted to. Or gone off on my own, like Kirian did. You wouldn't understand."

"You're right."

Agata drew Ivan aside. As he walked off, he turned to look back in wonder.

"And there's no need to," Fyodor added. "Well, good-bye, Semyon." Then he, too, walked away.

They looked after him in stunned silence, as if he had carried something off, but none of them knew what it was.

"All aboard!" a shout went up in the dusty distance. A bugle blew loudly and demandingly. The people stirred, but none of the men was in a hurry to board. Semyon's mother, brothers and Maria Firsova clustered around him. All of them were weeping, embracing him and talking at once. Natasha was left on the sidelines. They seemed to

have forgotten all about her.

"I won't have a chance to tell him. I won't have time to," she was thinking feverishly.

"See you behave from now on, Andrei," Semyon was saying, holding his brother's face up to his own. "And take care of Ma. Hear me?"

"Yes," Andrei replied, trying to avoid Semyon's eyes. "And be sure you write me just as soon as you get to the front lines."

"Goodbye, Anna," Natasha heard Ivan saying and saw him embrace her. At last Semyon was beside her. He pulled her off to a side.

"This is it, Natasha. Goodbye."

"Oh, Semyon, I'll be waiting for you." She wanted to add everything else she was going to say, but her mind had suddenly gone blank. She could not remember any of it and so merely kept repeating, "I'll be waiting for you."

The shrieking and wailing of the women, the insistent call of the bugle, the shouting of junior officers running up and down the length of the train and Vera Iniutina, who had showed up at the very last minute, all made it impossible for her to say what she had intended to.

"Good luck, Semyon! I love you anyway!" Vera shouted as she ran up. She embraced him hastily and kissed him.

"You could've stopped pretending now at least," he replied and moved out of her reach.

"It's the truth. You can think whatever you want to." There were tears in her eyes.

"What about Aleinikov? And what about Yura now?"

"Who cares about Yura?" She was gone as unexpectedly as she had appeared, and the reason she had run off was because Yura was making his way through the crowd.

"Boy! I nearly missed you! I had a hard time getting them to let me off," he said breathlessly. "I envy you."

"Somebody else beat you to it."

"What? Who?" Yura sounded puzzled. "Well, like it says in the song: 'If I die, may it be quick, if I'm wounded may it be slightly.' No fooling, though, I hope it won't be



either. My mother asked me to say she wished you a happy return."

"I said goodbye to her yesterday. What about Vera and you? "

"Nothing. She's a pretty girl, but she has an iron will. She jilted me."

"When? "

"Last winter. After the fire."

"That's right. You're not the director's son any more."

"So what? I mean, what do you mean? "

"I'll explain it after the war. Let me say goodbye to my wife, will you? " Semyon took both of Natasha's hands again, but the moment he did the whistle blasted, the cars clanged and each one jerked in turn.

"Get aboard, Savelyev! " an officer shouted as he ran past.

Once again Anna, Mariya Firsova, Andrei, Dima and Ganka crowded around him, but Semyon paid no attention to them. He was backing away, holding Natasha close, practically lifting her off the ground and carrying her along, as if he wanted to take her away with him.

"Goodbye, my darling. Goodbye. Wait for me." His trembling hand stroked her warm, dishevelled head. "I keep thinking I said something that hurt you when we were on the beach. I didn't mean to. Forgive me. Goodbye."

"Semyon! I don't want to, I can't.... Don't! " she shouted and then suddenly recalled the most important thing she had wanted to tell him. "I wanted to leave with you to where the fighting is. But I can't now, because I'm... Because we're going to have a baby."

Semyon had by then broken free of her embrace and jumped onto the step of a car that was sailing by, grabbing at the hands that were held down to him from within, but at the sound of this last phrase he jumped back down and gripped her tightly, shaking her as he spoke.

"Natasha! " His eyes glittered angrily and happily. "What did you say? What did you say? "

"We're going to have ... going to have...."

The train was moving slowly. Wailing were women holding on to the cars and running along the low embank-

ment, jostling Semyon and Natasha.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you say anything?" He had one arm around her. His free hand was stroking her cheeks, as though he wanted his hand to remember the outlines of her face. All the while he kept gazing in amazement at her sorrow-filled eyes.

"I don't know. It was so silly of me. I wanted to wait till the very last minute. So that this would be something you'd take with you. To help you through." Her voice was faint and happy. Her parched lips barely moved as she spoke. He kissed her salty lips. She shut her eyes.

The next moment he was gone.

Men hung in clusters from the cars as the train crawled off, curving as if to break through the solid wall of weeping, moaning voices. Semyon was running after the train, trying to catch up with the last car.

"He won't make it. He won't," Natasha's hopes soared. "He won't make it, and then he'll stay here with me. It's so simple. And then we'll go home, and everything'll be just like it was."

As he caught up with the last car hands reached down to him, grabbed him, lifted him and dragged him into the black, bottomless pit.

Natasha swayed and fell in a dead faint into the hot dust that had been churned up by so many hundreds of feet.

End of Book One

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